

PART 2 **PLAYER OF THE YEAR**
2015 MARCH + Pullout Bracket

MARCH 23, 2015

SI.COM

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MADNESS
SI's Final Four: 1. Kentucky 2-4. Three Other Teams **P.57**

Duke Freshman
JAHLIL OKAFOR
Rules The Paint
P.46

Photograph by
TODD ROSENBERG
Shot at American Legion
Post 360, Waunakee, Wis.

FRANK *the* TANK

"KAMINSKY NEVER DID FIND A WAY TO FIT IN. HE FOUND HE WAS BETTER OFF STANDING OUT."

**FORWARD MARCH!
THE 7-FOOT SENIOR HAS
THE BIG TEN CHAMPS
READY TO ROLL**

BY LUKE WINN **P.40**

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2015 | VOLUME 122 | NO. 12

LINEUP

NCAA
TOURNAMENT
PREVIEW

Part 2

Departments

- 4** SI Digital
- 6** SI Now
- 10** Leading Off
- 16** Inbox
- 19** Scorecard
- 30** Faces in The Crowd
- 32** Just My Type
Dan Patrick:
DeAndre Jordan
is breaking good
- 96** Point After
Michael Rosenberg:
Kentucky follows
Indiana down the
unbeaten path

40
Frank Kaminsky

SI's player of the year has a special combination of size and skill
By Luke Winn

46
Jahlil Okafor

Duke's freshman center borrowed his post game from the greats
By Luke Winn

57
SI's Brackets

Who will reach the Final Four in Indianapolis—and meet Kentucky
By Luke Winn

64
On Guards!

In filling out your bracket, consider backcourt matchups the key
By Phil Taylor

76
Women's Preview

Star power—and not just UConn's—will determine who takes the title
By Lindsay Schnell

BIG CHILL

Temperatures around 30° didn't daunt Kaminsky, who posed in only his uniform for a half hour during the cover shoot.

Features

NFL DRAFT

82

Sammie Coates

A receiver-needy team will be in good hands with the Auburn star, who has much to offer

By Andy Staples

PRO BASKETBALL

88

Patty Mills

No Spur has a richer story than the Indigenous Australian point guard's

By Alexander WolffPHOTOGRAPH BY
ELLIOT MANDEL

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FOR MARCH 23, 2015



SI
DIGITAL BONUS



I've Gotta Be Me

From the SI Vault
March 7, 1994

Babbling broadcaster Dick Vitale may seem to be all mouth, but he's also got a big heart—and a huge fear of failure
By Rick Reilly

To read this and other stories from the **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** archive, go to **SI.com/vault**



Four Sure?

Only three times since 1979 has no No. 1 seed made it to the Final Four. How far will each go this year? Will **Aaron Harrison** and top-ranked Kentucky be the first school to finish undefeated since Indiana in '76? Or will **Quinn Cook** help lead Duke to its fifth national crown? Can **Darrun Hilliard** and Villanova prove that the Big East is still a force to be reckoned with? Or will **Sam Dekker** and Wisconsin bring championship glory back to the Big Ten? Get answers to these questions, complete tournament coverage and a chance to win \$1 million in the **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** Bracket Challenge at **SI.com/college-basketball**

SI.COM'S Top Stories



1 Lift Like a Girl

For a roundup of last week's most popular stories on SI.com—including **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED's** High School Athlete of the Month, senior weightlifter **Savannah Braud** from Timber Creek High in Orlando—go to **SI.com/topstories**



SI PRO-FILES

As successful as many athletes are in their sports, some find even more success after they retire. To learn about former heavyweight champ **George Foreman** and his postboxing enterprises, as well as other sports figures turned business leaders, go to **SI.com/Pro-Files**, a series from the editors of **SPORTS ILLUSTRATED** and **FORTUNE**.



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"When I was playing I tried to use [the hate] to my advantage."

—Christian Laettner

factors at different times in your life. My freshman year I just wanted to be a starter and play; sophomore year we wanted to win a championship; junior year we finally won one; and then senior year the motivation was, Let's win it again and stick it to everybody because they don't want us to win and they're starting to hate us.

MG: After college, what was your proudest NBA moment?

CL: Proudest moment in the NBA was every second I was an NBA player. I loved it. The only thing that was hard and that I didn't appreciate was the media side of it. I was very bad at it, very naive. I made mistakes. There were times when I wasn't approachable and times when I didn't work with them the right way.

For more of Laettner's interview, plus the SI Now archive, go to SI.com/video

CHRISTIAN LAETTNER
The two-time NCAA champion at Duke and 1992 Olympic gold medalist chats with SI.com's Maggie Gray about ESPN's latest **30 for 30** documentary, *I Hate Christian Laettner!*

MAGGIE GRAY: A lot of people in your life believe it revved you up to be hated so much.

CHRISTIAN LAETTNER: It's not true, but there's only so much you can do with that type of vitriol and hate and dislike. You can't concentrate on it to where you can't sleep at night, so you may as well do something positive with it. When I was playing at the college level and in the

pros, I tried to use [the hate] to my advantage. But when you're done playing then it does start to ... I'm not going to say hurt, but you don't want people running around saying they hate you.

MG: Would you have been as good if you didn't channel that hatred and funnel it out onto the court?

CL: I don't think so, because you need certain motivating

TUNE IN



▶ **EPISODE: MARCH 9**

Former light heavyweight champ Antonio Tarver thinks **Pacquiao** has a shot against **Mayweather**.



▶ **EPISODE: MARCH 10**

Former NFL wide receiver **Sidney Rice** reveals his link to *House of Cards* POTUS Frank Underwood.



▶ **EPISODE: MARCH 11**

Peter King assesses the impact of **Jameis Winston's** meeting with Roger Goodell.



▶ **EPISODE: MARCH 13**

It may be time to legalize sports gambling, but will it compromise the integrity of sports?

PETER READ MILLER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (LAETTNER); ROBERT BECK/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (PACQUIAO, MAYWEATHER); DAMIAN STROMMEYER/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (RICE); JAC ROBBIN/GETTY IMAGES (WINSTON); JORD WAGNER/GETTY IMAGES (ROULETTE WHEEL)

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TOURNAMENT TIP SHEET

We asked SI's most reliable hoops thinkers: Which team will bust the most brackets this year?



SETH DAVIS

SMU. Two words: Larry Brown. The Mustangs also have a

Shabazz Napier-like "points" guard in Nic Moore, plus a bevy of bigs who can run, press and rebound.



CHRISTINA TAPPER

He can't suit up to nail a winning three, but Bryce Drew will return

Valparaiso to bracket-shattering glory as its coach.



TONY SCHEITINGER

Three veteran guards on a squad that's looking for redemption makes Wichita State dangerous.



JOHN MCDONOUGH

Gonzaga. Not your typical bracket-buster team, but I would love to

see the Zags crash their way into the Final Four party.



AMANDA YOUNGER

Even a proud Tar Heel has to admit that N.C. State's

up-tempo offense might upset a few brackets this year.



MICHAEL COHEN

St. John's. They have senior experience and one of the

best scoring guards in the country—D'Angelo Harrison.

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1
of
3**Leading
Off**

Fantastic Fours

■ One shining moment?

Rich Clarkson has captured thousands of them. This year the photographer will cover his 60th Final Four; he shot his first in 1952, when, as a Kansas freshman, he followed the Jayhawks' run to the national title. Dozens of his iconic images—including this Patrick Ewing dunk during Georgetown's semifinal win over Kentucky in '84, and several of the photos on the following pages—are now on display in *60 Years of the Men's Final Four* by Photographer Rich Clarkson, an exhibit at the NCAA Hall of Champions museum in Indianapolis. That city is also the site of this year's Final Four, and Clarkson will be there, adding to his legacy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
RICH CLARKSON
NCAA PHOTOS





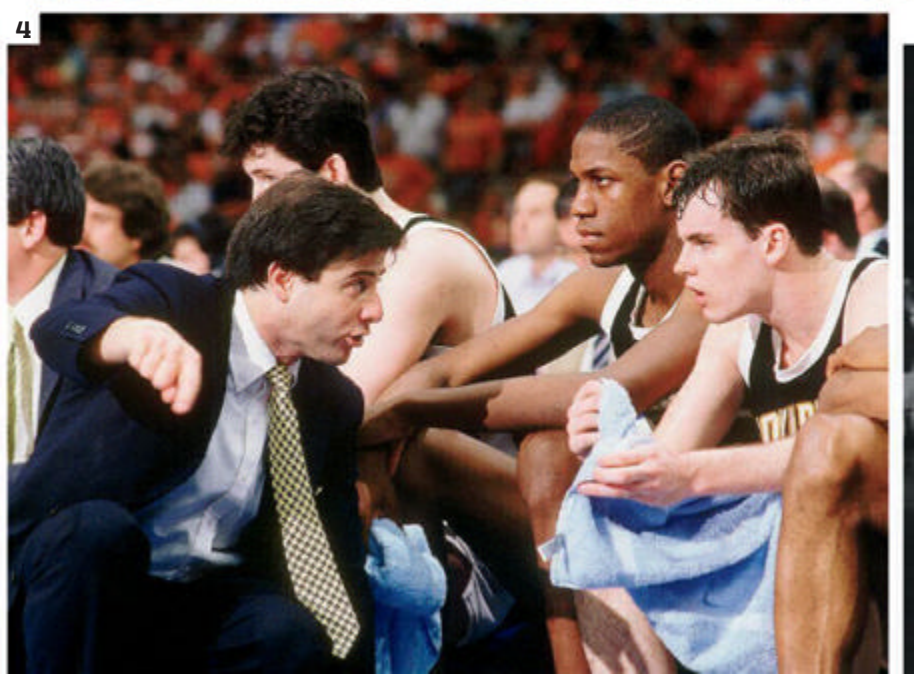
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4



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**Leading
Off**

Marches Of History

- 1.** Houston center Akeem Olajuwon, 1983
- 2.** Jacksonville center Artis Gilmore, 1970
- 3.** Michigan guard Jalen Rose (shooting), 1992
- 4.** Providence coach Rick Pitino talking to point guard Billy Donovan, 1987
- 5.** San Francisco center Bill Russell, 1955
- 6.** UCLA center Bill Walton, 1973

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RICH CLARKSON
NCAA PHOTOS







+

333



**Leading
Off**

No Strings Attached

1. Kentucky coach
Rick Pitino, 1996

2. UCLA center
Lew Alcindor with
his father, 1969

3. N.C. State
center Cozell
McQueen, 1983

4. Indiana point
guard Isiah
Thomas, 1981

5. Texas Western
guard Willie
Worsley, 1966

6. UCLA coach
John Wooden, 1975

7. Michigan State
point guard Magic
Johnson, 1979

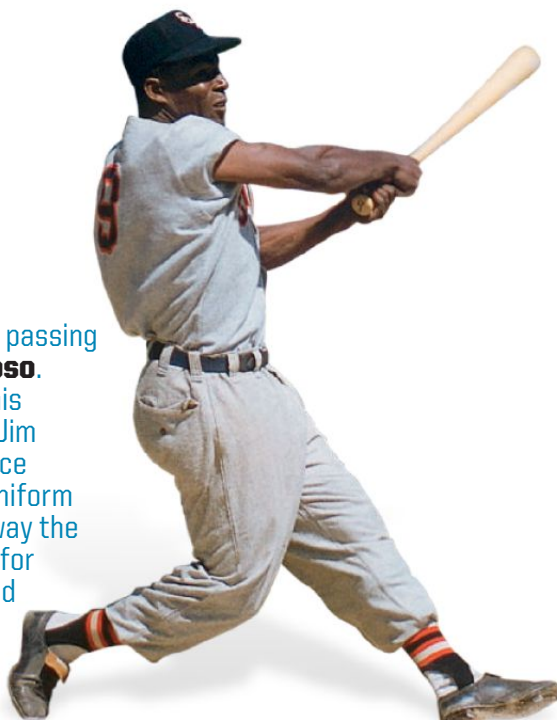
PHOTOGRAPHS BY
RICH CLARKSON
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INBOX

FOR MARCH 9, 2015

I was saddened to hear about the passing of White Sox legend **Minnie Miñoso**. Many years ago I ran into one of his former teammates, centerfielder Jim Landis. He told me that Miñoso once showered after a game with his uniform on because he wanted to wash away the bad spirits that were responsible for his slump. The next day Miñoso had four hits, with a home run.

Terry Griner, Spokane



The main problem with college basketball is the final two minutes of the games, which have become a series of endless stoppages due to timeouts, fouls and referees bent over a table staring at computer screens.

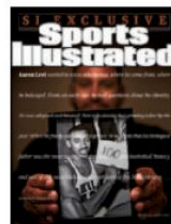
Mike Massie, Laramie, Wyo.

There are two reasons why scoring is down in college hoops. Players are now bigger, stronger and faster, so it has become harder to score against defenders. Plus, the players' basketball skills have diminished. Many of them spend hours in the gym getting muscle, but aren't working on the fundamentals.

Jay C. Peters, Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio

I enjoyed Lee Jenkins's feature on the Hawks, but what about the **Bucks?** Milwaukee, which won 15 games last year, has a new coach and 34 wins through Sunday and was sixth in the Eastern Conference.

Daniel Feigin, New York City



COVER

I thoroughly enjoyed Gary Pomerantz's article on **Aaron Levi**. One thing in the story did give me pause, though. Levi said of his mother, "She sees [Wilt] as a womanizer. ... To me, he's my father." I respectfully disagree. While Chamberlain may have contributed to Aaron's conception, Don Levi, the man who raised him, is his father.

Glenn Bischoff
Bartlett, Ill.

I don't understand why Chamberlain's sisters would deny Levi closure by refusing to submit a saliva sample for a simple DNA test. Their brother's integrity was already destroyed when he bragged about being with 20,000 women.

James Jasinski
Centerville, Ohio

While it's obvious that Levi is hurting, how does he know if his biological mother is telling the truth? Unfortunately, this may be a burden that he carries to his grave.

Vic Presutti
Dayton, Ohio

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SCORECARD

Free-for-All

[A former front-office staffer and an X's-and-O's expert break down the NFL's off-season bazaar](#)

BY ANDREW BRANDT AND DOUG FARRAR

We heard all week about the relatively new "legal tampering" window (starting three days before free agency, teams could negotiate with agents but not make offers) and how it created chaos (teams did make offers, which quickly leaked). Will anything come of the NFL's inquiry into the violations?

To this investigation, one of several ongoing, I respectfully say: Good luck with *that*. Whether or not there's a pre-free agency window, teams are too competitive (and distrustful) to wait for the opening bell. Deals will be in place beforehand. If investigated, teams and agents always have plausible deniability,

citing unresolved contract terms. Even before this 72-hour "fake negotiating" window was introduced in 2013, agreements were reported within minutes of the official start of free agency. Does the NFL really believe such deals were actually negotiated in that time? —A.B.

What about the deals that were reneged on?

Teams can be cutthroat. Coaches will call players who have committed to other teams and ask, "Did you actually *sign*?" When players reverse course, as running back Frank Gore did, jilting the Eagles for the Colts, teams can be livid. When I was the vice president for the Packers,



free-agent defensive tackle Sam Adams reneged on a contract I negotiated and signed the same deal with the Ravens. I was crestfallen and told the agent we would never work with him again. One year later he represented a player we liked, and I swallowed my pride before calling the agent. It's always about the player. Were a team to renege, however, it would lose some trust among agents and players, which could hurt its chances to sign others. —A.B.

We saw an unusual number of player-for-player trades. Will this be a trend? Is the NFL the new NBA?

Teams have become better at cap and contract management. (There are cap consequences in a trade, just as if the player were released.) But I think this is more anecdotal than evidence of a trend. The Lions and the Seahawks—jilted by defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh and tight end Julius Thomas, respectively—responded

with the replacement acquisitions of Haloti Ngata and Jimmy Graham from the cap-challenged Ravens and Saints. Eagles coach Chip Kelly locked in on quarterback Sam Bradford and used his QB, Nick Foles, as a logical trade piece. Tailback LeSean McCoy (now a Bill) and receiver Brandon Marshall (a Jet) were high-salaried veterans deemed expendable; once teams feel that way, they've already moved on. They'd accept a ham sandwich as compensation. —A.B.

Suh: Was he worth the money?

His six-year, \$114 million deal (with \$60 million guaranteed) was the largest contract ever given to a defensive player, and it was a combination of need and market forces—he was going to get similar terms from someone. The Dolphins have gone 8–8 in each of the last two seasons; they finished 11th in scoring in 2014, up from 26th the year before. What probably kept them out of the playoffs was a rushing D that allowed an average of 165.3 yards over the final six games (when Miami went 2–4) after giving up 94.5 in the first 10. Suh is a transcendent talent against the run and the pass, and the Dolphins believe he makes them a playoff team. They may be right. —D.F.

What about Jimmy Graham—how will he change Seattle's offense?

Graham is a receiver classified as a tight end, and he's exactly what Seattle needed on the decisive play of the Super Bowl. He has been Drew Brees's primary target since 2011, and he'll probably be the same for Russell Wilson. The Seahawks love to run

two-tight-end packages, and Graham is a beast in the red zone—he led the league with 16 receiving touchdowns in 2013, and he's been targeted from the one-yard line nine times in his career. The result? Eight touchdowns. —D.F.

So which running back has it better now—LeSean McCoy or DeMarco Murray?

On the surface it appears to be Murray. Kelly's offense creates natural openings through spacing and defensive confusion, similar to the one Murray excelled in at Oklahoma. In Buffalo, McCoy will operate in a different set of schemes while playing for a team so bereft of talent that the Bills are taking a flier on guard Richie Incognito, who would be a subpar option even without his bullying-scandal background. —D.F.

Which sort of makes the Cowboys look like losers. What's going on with Dallas's newfound frugality?

After years of loose spending and a “worry about it later” mentality, there's a new Big D in Dallas: Discipline. That started last May when owner Jerry Jones resisted his impulse (or maybe someone stopped him) to draft quarterback Johnny Manziel and took offensive lineman Zack Martin instead. It also popped up in risk-averse contracts for ascending players such as linebacker Sean Lee and left tackle Tyron Smith. Whether through learning from past mistakes, allowing son Stephen more influence or charting a more proven path to success, there appears to be a new, levelheaded Cowboys owner impersonating the Jerry Jones we knew. —A.B.

GO FIGURE

2

50-point games this season for Cavaliers guard KYRIE IRVING, who scored 57 against the Spurs last Thursday after going for 55 against the Trail Blazers on Jan. 28—the two highest-scoring games in the NBA this season. The last player to have the two highest-scoring games in the same season was Kobe Bryant in 2007–08.



4,321

Pull-ups performed in one day by 54-year-old

Mark Jordan of Corpus Christi, Texas, in November. On March 11, Jordan's total was certified as the most ever by the Guinness Book of World Records.

209



Soccer ranking of Bhutan, the worst in the world, which beat Sri Lanka 1–0 in 2018 World Cup qualifying last Thursday.

1,018.54

Pounds deadlifted by Eddie Hall of the U.K. at the 2015 Arnold Classic in Melbourne, Australia, last Friday, breaking the world record set by Iceland's Benedikt Magnússon (1,016.33) last August.



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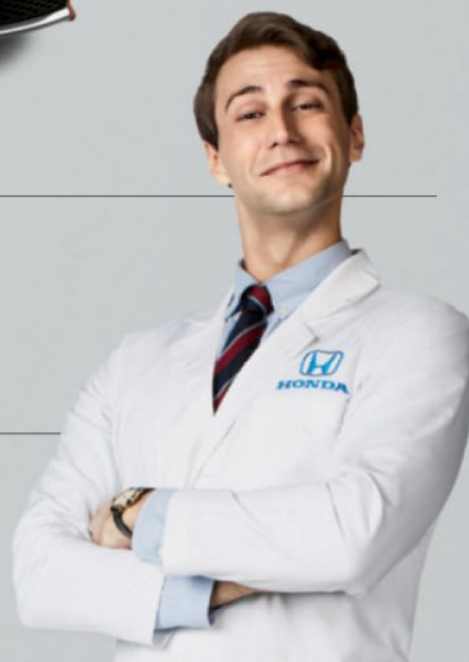


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TENNIS

+

Big Return

Serena Williams goes back to Indian Wells

THE CATALOG OF

Serena Williams's tennis virtues is a thick one. It starts with furious ball striking. Then there's the slobber-knocking serve—the best in the history of the women's game. There's speed. Competitive resolve. Tactics that don't get enough credit. And while flexibility would not rate high on the list, last week Williams distinguished herself for just that, pivoting gracefully from a position that she had long held.

It was 14 years ago that Serena was supposed to play her sister Venus in a much anticipated semifinal at Indian Wells. Venus



withdrew shortly before the match, citing injury and angering the crowd, who thought the Williamses were manipulating the results. When Serena played the final, boos echoed in the stadium, and the Williams family said they were subjected to racist taunts. There are still discrepancies

and dueling narratives, but everyone agrees on one thing: It was an ugly day all around. Serena won, but both she and Venus vowed never to return to the tournament.

Serena was a 19-year-old with one Grand Slam title at the time of the incident; now she's 33, with 19 Slams. Purchased by tech billionaire Larry Ellison, the Indian Wells event has evolved too. Last month Serena reversed course. She wouldn't necessarily forget, but she would forgive. On Friday night she played her first match at Indian Wells since 2001, a 7–5, 7–5 win over Monica Niculescu. Serena put it this way when she announced her decision: “I’m fortunate to be at a point in my career where I have nothing to prove.”

She's right. And that's precisely the time when athletes do some of their most meaningful work.

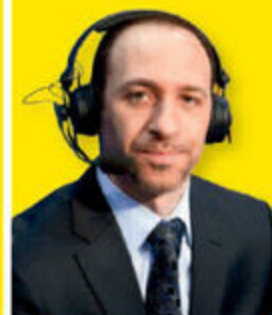
—L. Jon Wertheim

THEY SAID IT

“That’s on the list.”

Dave Pasch,

ESPN announcer, responding to his partner Bill Walton’s question during a Pac-12 tournament game: Ever been to a volcano while it’s erupting?

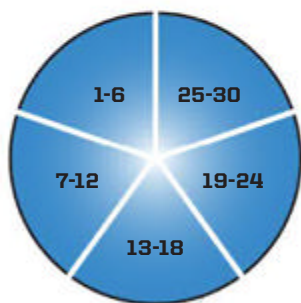


NBA

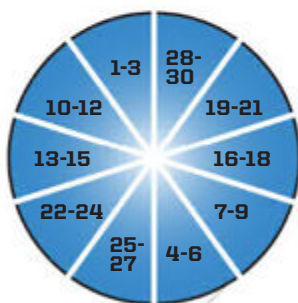
+

Worth a Spin

How to demolish tanking



5-year plan



10-year plan

EVEN WITH A lottery, some NBA teams find incentive to lose, so, Celtics assistant GM Mike Zarren dreamed up a way to eliminate the race to the bottom. Enter the draft wheel.

After his initial 30-year draft wheel was rejected by NBA owners last summer, Zarren unveiled a slimmed-down version at the 2015 MIT Sloan Sports Analytics Conference last month. The revamped five- and 10-year models randomly cluster teams together and cycle them through different groups of picks each year. For example, the 10-year wheel has 10 groups of three—say, one to three, or 28 to 30—based on a spin of the wheel, then randomly assigned one of those three spots. For each of the next nine years the wheel would assign that group a different three-pick range until the cycle was complete. The process would mean some teams—even bad ones—could go through the whole cycle without getting the top pick, but every team would have at least the No. 3 choice at some point.

Will owners set the wheel in motion? It would be a major loss for losers, but a big win for everyone else.

—Matt Dollinger

EXTRA MUSTARD

Smith Degrees of Separation

Connecting athletes to their celebrity name twins in six stages

LAST WEEK Brewers lefthander Will Smith wrote a letter to movie star Will Smith explaining why they should be friends. The two are already connected, though, as are many athletes who share names with actors. —Emily Kaplan



Will Smith ❶ plays for Milwaukee, where he is teammates with ❷ Ryan Braun, who used to be the co-owner of a Wisconsin restaurant with ❸ Aaron Rodgers, who is dating ❹ Olivia Munn, who was in *Magic Mike*, the sequel of which comes out this summer starring ❺ Jada Pinkett-Smith, who is married to ❻ **Will Smith**.



Panthers running back **Jonathan Stewart** ❶ is a teammate of ❷ Cam Newton, who endorses Dannon's Oikos yogurt, replacing former pitcher ❸ John Stamos, who starred on *Full House* with ❹ Bob Saget, who had a cameo on *Louie*, created by comedian ❺ Louis C.K., who has been a guest on *The Daily Show* with ❻ **Jon Stewart**.



Virginia coach **Tony Bennett** ❶ played for the Charlotte Hornets, where he was teammates with ❷ Larry Johnson, who appeared on *Family Matters* with ❸ Jaleel White, who was on *Dancing with the Stars* with ❹ Gladys Knight, who along with the Pips sang for the Motown label with ❺ Stevie Wonder, who recently recorded a duet with ❻ **Tony Bennett**.



Golfer **Adam Scott** ❶ used to date tennis star ❷ Ana Ivanovic, who at the 2014 Australian Open defeated No. 1-ranked ❸ Serena Williams, who appeared in a 2004 episode of *Law & Order SVU*, which also featured ❹ Gary Cole, who was in *Pineapple Express* along with ❺ James Franco, who had a cameo in *Knocked Up* with ❻ **Adam Scott**.



SIGN OF THE APOCALYPSE



The Brewers banned high fives in an attempt to halt the spread of pinkeye in their clubhouse.



BREAKOUT PERFORMER

HOT

Russell Westbrook

Six triple doubles in an eight-game stretch. Give a guy a mask, and he thinks he's a superhero.

Harvard

Earned fourth-straight tourney bid. Alums already working it into first five minutes of every conversation.

Joe Thornton

Said the Sharks' GM should "shut his mouth." He's either got great job security or none.

Ezekiel Elliott

Ohio State back joins movement to end NCAA's ban of cropped jerseys. Man loves his six-pack.

Oliver Purnell

Out as DePaul hoops coach. Never mind Ray Meyer—Urban Meyer couldn't win there.



NOT



TRAINING WITH



Preseason Push

Evan Longoria's personalized winter workout

“IT’S TAKEN A lot of years for me to understand what my body needs,” says Evan Longoria, the Rays’ 29-year-old third baseman who is entering his eighth MLB season. “I don’t want to put 500 pounds on my back and squat, because it doesn’t translate for me on the field. My workout program is tailored to being baseball strong.”

Before reporting to camp in Port Charlotte, Fla., the 6’ 2”, 210-pound Longoria hit the gym four days a week for three to four hours at a pop with a focus on refining specific muscles while maintaining flexibility. His

routine was divided into four segments—warmup, movement skills, weight training and conditioning—and led by John Stemmerman, a certified strength and conditioning specialist (CSCS) and performance manager at EXOS in Phoenix, where Longoria has spent his winters since 2008. The program includes core work, power and speed drills, and baseball-specific movements through plyometrics and medicine ball drills, such as rotational throwing.

“I was sucking wind 10 minutes into it the first week,” says Longoria,

Tampa Bay’s career leader in home runs (193) and RBIs (656). “We hit on multiple areas within the same workout—like circuit training—and by the time we’re supposed to go lift weights, I’m gassed.”

The weightlifting segment concentrated on either arms or legs and was followed by conditioning work—sled pushes and kettlebell exercises. Longoria finished each session with a chocolate protein shake. After nearly two months of training he hopes his preparation will pay off during the 162-game season. “You have to trust in the work you’ve put in,” says Longoria. “I still have this passion for the game, this little bit of insecurity that somebody is going to take my job—that keeps me going.” —*Jamie Lisanti*

EDGE

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Leg Drive

Because Longoria has suffered hamstring and foot injuries, Stemmerman avoids heavy squats, instead using step-ups and lunges, which isolate each leg while maximizing strength. The step-up exercise mimics acceleration mechanics, which can help with fielding a ground ball or stealing a base. Here’s how Longoria does it.

Step-ups

- ✦ Four sets of three reps on each leg
- ✦ Dumbbells or kettlebells (Longoria uses 80 or 90 pounds)

- 1.** Stand holding dumbbells, with one foot on a 12" box and torso leaning slightly forward
- 2.** Explode off the raised leg and push up to a standing position
- 3.** Switch legs and repeat



For more athlete training profiles and tips, go to SI.com/trainingwith

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**GET
YOUR
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RUNNING

+
Mountain
Mask?[An altitude simulator](#)**WHEN SEAHAWKS**

All-Pro running back Marshawn Lynch wore a colorful neoprene mask in the days before Super Bowl XLIX, he drew comparisons to everyone from Hannibal Lecter to the Batman villain Bane. But what looked strange then now seems commonplace, as NBA stars such as Dwyane Wade and Dwight Howard have been spotted wearing the headgear during workouts. So what is it?

It's called the Elevation Training Mask, and the model Lynch uses, Training Mask 2.0, employs three resistance valves to regulate breathing in



an effort to mimic the benefits athletes get from training at elevations from 3,000 to 18,000 feet. According to Casey Danford, the company's CEO, the device conditions athletes' lungs by creating pulmonary resistance and strengthening their diaphragms. The valve system forces athletes to

inhale fuller, deeper breaths. As their bodies adapt, their lungs theoretically learn to use the available oxygen more efficiently.

But Michael Ross, a sports medicine physician at the Rothman Institute and director of Rothman's Performance Lab at Velocity Sports Performance in Cherry Hill, N.J., says that

Beast Wrap

Lynch was the device's NFL poster child, but it's been worn by NBA stars too.

the advantages athletes gain from high-altitude training result more from being exposed to those conditions during longer periods of rest rather than for shorter, intense workouts. Ross adds there may also be dangers associated with using the mask if an athlete doesn't have a healthy heart.

Lynch is sold on the benefits. "I put the mask on, and I probably did a lap around the building where we train, and halfway through the lap, I had to take it off and stop," he says. "Three days of working out with it, my wind got that much better. I just get my mask on, and I get my little boost like"—Lynch takes a deep breath and exhales—"O.K., it's time to go to war."

—Daniel Friedman

ALTERNATE ROUTES

[U.S. Olympic marathoner Meb Keflezighi offers five ways to juice your training regimen without extra apparel—or overly taxing your body](#)

**Cross-Training**

Use an elliptical bicycle in high-energy 45-minute intervals

**Aquatics**

Jog in a pool for an hour to improve lung capacity

**Cycling**

Ride for anywhere from 45 minutes to 1½ hours a day

**Core Workouts**

From planks to push-ups, core strength improves overall fitness

**Partner Up**

Running with someone helps you stay motivated and reach your goals more easily



A man and a woman are running on a paved road. The woman is in the foreground, wearing a blue ASICS t-shirt, dark blue leggings with orange accents, and blue and orange ASICS running shoes. She has a brown ASICS armband on her right arm and a white watch on her left wrist. The man is running behind her, wearing a green ASICS t-shirt, black shorts, and green and black ASICS running shoes. They are both looking forward with determination. The background features a calm lake, rolling hills, and a clear blue sky with some clouds. The ASICS logo is visible in the top right corner.

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UPDATE

This Ironman Won't Rust

■ **BILL BELL**, 92, wakes up every morning around 4 and goes for a 20-mile predawn bike ride, gliding through the empty, darkened streets of Palm Desert, Calif. Afterward the grandfather of eight might hit the pool or pop into a Pilates class at his retirement community. He has completed more than 300 triathlons, including 19 Ironman World Championships in Kailua-Kona, Hawaii; Bell was featured in *FACES* for winning his age group there in '96, one of five times he bested his peers in the annual race. He appeared in *SI* again in 2001, at 78, as the then-oldest Ironman finisher. Next month he will be inducted into the USA Triathlon Hall of Fame at a ceremony in Boston. The retired aeronautical engineer has a pacemaker and has traded running for power walking but has no plans to give up training and racing. "I'm still hanging tough," Bell says. —A.F.



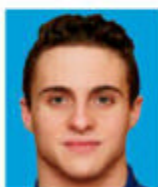
Ben Simmons | *Melbourne, Australia* | *Basketball*

Ben, a 6' 9" senior power forward at Montverde [Fla.] Academy, averaged 28.0 points, 11.9 rebounds and 4.0 assists to lead the Eagles to a 28-1 record. He was named the Naismith Trophy boys' player of the year and received the Morgan Wootten Award, given to the top McDonald's All-American. Ben will play at LSU.



Madison Bear | *Portage, Wis.* | *Curling*

Madison, a senior skip at Portage High, led her rink [four-person team] to an 8-4 victory over Poynette High to become the first girl to win three Wisconsin titles. In January her rink came in second at junior nationals in Devils Lake, N.D. Madison is a three-time champ of the Tietje Junior Bonspiel, the sport's oldest high school tournament.



Sam Moelis | *Hewlett, N.Y.* | *Fencing*

Sam, a junior at Lynbrook High and the No. 1-ranked cadet [17-and-under] and junior [20-and-under] foil in the U.S., beat two-time junior world team medalist Nobuo Bravo [San Francisco] 15-14 in Reno to win the Division I title. Sam will compete at junior worlds in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, next month for both the cadet and junior teams.

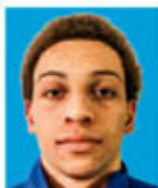
FACES IN THE CROWD

Edited by ALEXANDRA FENWICK



Jeanette Cudney | *Cazenovia, N.Y.* | *Snowshoeing*

Cudney, a freshman at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, won the junior world 5K championship in 30:10 in Quebec City in January. Last month she took her second straight junior national title, in Eau Claire, Wis., in 24:00. Cudney also runs cross-country and track at Division II Le Moyne and earned All-Academic honors last fall.



Jason Arthur | *Teaneck, N.J.* | *Swimming*

Jason, a junior at Teaneck High, won the 200-yard individual medley state title in a Meet of Champions record time of 1:49.16, beating the previous mark by 1.27. He also finished second in the 100 back [50.14]. Jason led the Highwaymen to a 13-4 record and was named the *Bergen Record's* North Jersey boys' swimmer of the year.



Emily Webster | *Sedalia, Mo.* | *Wrestling*

Webster, a senior at Oklahoma City University, defeated Marina Doi of King University [Bristol, Tenn.] by technical fall 10-0 to earn her fourth 101-pound Women's College Wrestling Association title and finish her college career 118-0. Webster is also a three-time junior freestyle and a two-time junior folkstyle champion.

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JUST MY TYPE

→ Interview by
DAN PATRICK

DAN PATRICK: *I heard you're a big Breaking Bad fan.*

DEANDRE JORDAN: I am.

I love Walter White. I really wish the show could have kept going.

DP: *Would you have liked to have had a cameo?*

DJ: Absolutely. Even if I died in the only scene I was in, it would have been really cool to be a part of that.

DP: *What was it about the show that you liked so much?*

DJ: It was such a twist. Seeing Bryan Cranston go from playing the dad on *Malcolm in the Middle* to Walter White, this drug-dealing guy who is going berserk, was great. All of the characters were funny to me.

DP: *How well is Russell Westbrook playing?*

DJ: He's playing amazing. It's really cool to see and really fun to watch one of your peers doing things like that and breaking all these records.

DP: *If you could be any player in the NBA, not on your team, who would it be?*

DJ: That's tough. Probably James Harden. He's playing great basketball, especially with Dwight [Howard] out.

DP: *Did you see the video when Chris Paul freaked out at the end of a game when you had the ball and there was still time on the clock?*

DJ: I saw the video. But at that point I really didn't see



DEANDRE JORDAN

BREAKING BIG

The Clippers' 6' 11" center is doing a star turn as the NBA's leading rebounder (14.7 per game) and shooter (71.6%), but he would have happily settled for a bit part in his favorite TV show.

Chris yelling at me [to shoot]. I [finally] heard other people yell, "Shoot it!" and I shot the ball. But to make a case for myself, when I got the rebound and looked at the shot clock, the clock was stopped at 0.7, so I was thinking there was an error. I definitely got killed for it.

DP: *It's like the big guy who is holding the ball and the little guy is jumping up trying to get it.*

DJ: Yeah, that was funny. It was like I was playing keepaway from my son.

DP: *Can Chris Paul dunk?*

DJ: He can. Chris has had a dunk this season. I always want him to get at least two dunks every season to let us know he's somewhat athletic.

DP: *How frustrating is it when you're intentionally fouled?*

DJ: It was more frustrating when I was younger or a couple years ago. I was like, Why are they doing this? Let's just play basketball. Now I don't think about it as much. I just get up there and shoot the shot. If they go in, they go in.

DP: *Shaq used to say he was great in practice at the line. Are you good in practice?*

DJ: Contrary to popular belief, I am. I think it's more mental at this point. In practice or before games you knock down so many in a row. Then once you get up there during a game, there are other distractions. □

GUEST SHOTS SAY WHAT?



ESPN's **Jay Bilas** has an issue with

the NCAA's penalizing Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim for the actions of boosters. "If you're going to call Jim Boeheim a cheater over this," Bilas said, "then don't we have to be willing to call John Wooden a cheater after what went on with [UCLA booster] Sam Gilbert?" ...



Wisconsin coach **Bo Ryan** is impressed

with the Wildcats' depth. "They have the No. 1-ranked team in the country, Kentucky Blue," Ryan told me. "And the No. 2-ranked team in the country, Kentucky White. Their practices are pretty good." ... Wizards point guard



John Wall wasn't exactly impressed

after shooting around with President Obama. "He missed like seven or eight shots in a row," Wall said. He had to shoot a layup because kids were picking on him. Usually lefties have pretty form. His form is not too pretty."

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The Case for . . . Less Genius

BY BILL SYKEN

WENT TO A 76ers game recently, and it was surprisingly relaxing. It's hard to get worked up when you have little history with the players and no expectation of a win. My only regret was that general manager Sam Hinkie didn't come out and make a deal for a second-round pick. It's a bummer to buy a ticket and not see the team's biggest star in action.

These are strange days in Philadelphia. The two most prominent people on the sports scene are Hinkie and Chip Kelly, the Eagles' coach and de facto GM. In the two years since they came to town, the talk has been about them and their methods more than anyone who plays the games.

That's upside-down, right? No one fell in love with sports to follow the doings of management. Now, though, it's all about the geniuses. You get the feeling that if they made *Rocky* today, it would focus on Mickey's outside-the-box training methods—how he swapped out the glass of raw eggs for a personalized protein shake.

Protein shakes are but an aspect of the culture Kelly brought from Oregon. He set tongues a-wagging with his high-speed offense, but as conversation pieces go, his no-huddle was a mere warmup act. Since Kelly gained control over personnel in January, he has been flicking Pro Bowlers from

his roster as if they were Cheetos crumbs that had landed on his Marcus Mariota scouting report.

Last week Kelly traded running back LeSean McCoy and quarterback Nick Foles and also let receiver Jeremy Maclin leave in free agency. Add Kelly's outright cutting of receiver DeSean Jackson in the 2014 off-season, and you could argue that he's sent packing the team's four most popular players. If locals take their time embracing running back DeMarco Murray, signed from the Cowboys, it will be because Kelly has been turning jerseys bought on the team website for \$99.95 into vintage items at a pace that matches his play-calling.

But, hey, at least ol' Chipper, who has led Philly to two 10–6 seasons, wants to win now. Hinkie favors a “win later” strategy that takes the fans’

Since
Hinkie
and Kelly
have come
to Philly,
the talk
has been
more
about
them
than
anyone
who
plays the
games.

patience for granted, asking them to buy tickets and bravely endure, as if maneuvering for draft picks and chucking away seasons is the only path to victory. (Didn't the Hawks rise in the East by such quaint methods as hiring a good coach, finding value with middle-position draft choices and investing wisely in free agency?)

Kelly's latest deals, though they have the potential to pay off grandly, hint at a similar disregard. The players he acquired in the McCoy and Foles deals, quarterback Sam Bradford and linebacker Kiko Alonso, both missed all of last season with ACL injuries. The view of the pessimist—Philly has a few—is that Kelly can take the risk because he knows that if these moves blow up, he can pull a Nick Saban and retreat to college. As Dolphins coach in 2006, Saban acquired quarterback Daunte Culpepper instead of Drew Brees. When it became obvious that he had made the wrong call, Saban fled Miami for Alabama. The Dolphins still haven't recovered.

Throughout sports we hear much more about the puppet masters than we used to. Why? Some of it, I think, is a side effect of fantasy, which promotes a transitory view of players. In addition, the 24-hour news machine likes GMs because they make moves all year, not just during games. The biggest culprit, though, is *Moneyball*. The movie, even more than the book, made heroes of the Billy Beanes of the world. Hinkie proceeds with the unblinking conviction of a man who expects to sell his life rights to Brad Pitt.

Here's a request for Kelly and Hinkie: Find players, give them good schemes, but please, keep some of them in town awhile. Make Philadelphia a place where it's safe to buy a jersey again. □



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A PERIODIC LOOK AT SOME OF
THE MOST INTRIGUING RISING STARS

BIG BOARD

Great Point

Once Ohio State's D'Angelo Russell settled on a position, his draft stock started soaring

BY CHRIS MANNIX

OHIO STATE coach Thad Matta knew D'Angelo Russell could play. A lanky, 6' 5" guard, Russell was a cornerstone for back-to-back national tournament champion Montverde (Fla.) Academy; a McDonald's All-American; and a willing passer with extrasensory court vision, yet someone who could score when necessary. *Where* he'd play for the Buckeyes would require some thought. "In D'Angelo, I saw a guard," says Matta. "He wasn't a true point, but he had such an understanding of the game. You just knew it would sort itself out."

Has it ever. In four months Russell, 19, has evolved from a highly touted prospect without a defined position—ranked No. 18 by Rivals.com last

May—to the nation's best freshman point guard and one who has the tools to star at that spot in the pros. If you asked NBA general managers about D'Angelo in November, they might have thought you were talking about the R&B singer or the sub-shop chain; today they can't stop gushing about a likely top five pick who averaged 19.3 points, 5.6 rebounds and 5.1 assists. "He's the total package," says a GM. "His court awareness is as sharp as any freshman's I have ever seen."

Matta got glimpses of Russell's potential early. When Ohio State traveled to the Bahamas last August for an exhibition series, the coach was blown away by Russell's basketball IQ. And when the Buckeyes went to West Virginia for a closed scrimmage in October, Russell was their only player

who could consistently get open. In practice Russell showed an uncanny ability to not only process plays but also to offer ways to improve on them. "He sees things that a lot of other guys can't see," says Matta. "There were times he would suggest something, and I'd think, My gosh, how did he think of that?"

Last summer Russell reviewed most of Ohio State's games from 2013–14; in his free time he can often be found dissecting film. That studiousness paid off on Dec. 2, when the Buckeyes faced their first true test, at Louisville. Ohio State fell behind by 19 early in the second half, and with senior guard Shannon Scott struggling to run the offense, Matta turned the team over to Russell. The Buckeyes cut the deficit to three before losing by nine, but Russell had made a statement. "When he is out there, he owns the court," says Matta. "It's his gym." Adds an NBA scout, "When he speaks, everyone listens. He is their leader."

Russell's strength is his playmaking; every pass has some pop behind it. On Feb. 11 against Penn State, Russell zipped a chest pass from half-court through the defense for a layup. "Took less than a second," says

Matta. "Hit the guy right on the numbers." Many of Russell's 97 turnovers have been due less to poor decision making than to his teammates' surprise at his ability to thread the ball through traffic. "He sees how a play is going to develop before it does," says the scout. "There are not many NBA point guards that can do that. It's a Chris Paul-type skill. And he has got it."

Criticisms of Russell are rare, and they almost always come with a qualifier. He's not overwhelmingly athletic, but he's quick enough and, at 180 pounds, able to bang with bigger point guards. While the form on his jump shot is clean, his release is a little slow, but that can be improved with NBA coaching. And he can be too unselfish, but that's far from a fatal flaw. "He would rather have a 14-8-6 line and win than score 25 and lose," says Matta. "There are not many guys his age who can say that."

On March 8, in Ohio State's home finale against Wisconsin, the student section chanted *One! More! Year!* in Russell's direction. "I didn't hear them," says Matta. "If I did, I would have been yelling it too." Still, it would be a surprise if Russell came back to Columbus. He should challenge Emmanuel Mudiay—the former high school phenom who played in China this season—to be the first point guard off the board. Says the GM of Russell, "Guys with his skills won't fall very far." □

RISEINGSTARS

For an exclusive video feature on D'Angelo Russell, or to watch any of the Rising Stars series presented by Symetra, go to SL.com/risingstars



ON THE MOVE

Four other players whose draft prospects are rapidly rising



WILLIE CAULEY-STEIN, C
KENTUCKY / **7 FEET** / Junior

The backbone of the nation's top-rated defense, Cauley-Stein can bang with bigs down low or step out and defend guards. Though limited offensively, he is efficient (58.0% from the field) and rarely forces shots.



R.J. HUNTER, SG
GEORGIA STATE / **6' 6"** / Junior

From Damian Lillard to Elfrid Payton, top mid-major talent has had a nice NBA run. That will continue with Hunter, a relentless scorer (20.1 points per game) who just needs to polish his three-point shot.



BOBBY PORTIS, PF
ARKANSAS / **6' 11"** / Sophomore

While playing comparable minutes to last season, Portis has significantly improved his scoring (17.7 points per game, up from 12.3) and rebounding (8.8, up from 6.8) and is connecting on 44.4% of his three-pointers.



JERIAN GRANT, PG
NOTRE DAME / **6' 5"** / Senior

In December 2013, Grant, then the Irish's leading scorer, was suspended for the rest of the season for academic reasons. Reinstated this season, he reemerged as one of college hoops' best playmakers, and ranks seventh nationally with 6.6 assists per game.

—C.M.



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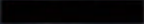
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Michigan State's
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Valentine couldn't
contain Kaminsky
(19 points, five
boards) in the
Big Ten title game.



NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW / *Part 2*



It took most of his four-year career for Wisconsin forward Frank Kaminsky, SI's national player of the year, to appreciate his special combination of size and skill

PERFECT MISFIT

BY LUKE WINN

Photograph by
Robin Alam
Icon Sportswire

FRANK KAMINSKY

JAHIL OKAFOR

SI'S BRACKETS

ON GUARDS

WOMEN'S PREVIEW



THEY TRAVELED in rented station wagons, long-legged men crammed in together with their luggage stowed up top, caravanning between college towns, logging thousands of miles for road games that never counted. Their team never had a shot at the NCAA tournament, yet it had hundreds of November wins over Division I schools in the 1980s and '90s. Marathon Oil is what everyone called that era's preeminent exhibition-game barnstormers, even though the team lost its petro-sponsorship in '84 and tried to rebrand as Marathon Basketball. On a Venn diagram for pro ballers, Marathoners would fall in the sector where talent does not overlap with recognition or riches. In the winter they'd either head overseas or return to regular jobs.

One of Marathon's point guards, Stevie King, had been a standout at NAIA Wisconsin-Parkside, and he liked to penetrate and kick to a 6' 10" center with a specialty that was ahead of its time: hitting long jumpers. "He was a stretch four before they even thought of stretch fours," King says of Frank Kaminsky Jr., who was an honorable-mention NAIA All-America at Lewis University in Romeoville, Ill., in 1976 and '77, a decade before the arrival of a three-point line that might have made him more of a hot commodity. Kaminsky used his vacation days from his sales job at Phillip Morris to go and score 20-plus points against Georgia or Penn State, or grab 14 rebounds in a win over 12th-ranked Auburn in '86. The grueling car trips never bothered him. "For a basketball junkie like me," he says, "it was heaven." This afterlife lasted until Nov. 25, 1995, when he hung up his hightops after scoring 13 points in a win over a Ball State team that featured Bonzi Wells. Kaminsky's achievement never got the heroic headline it deserved: MAN FINDS WAY TO PLAY IN COLLEGE GAMES UNTIL HE'S 40.

In this light it should not seem so anomalous that Francis Stanley Kaminsky III, that man's 7-foot, 242-pound son and SI's choice for national player of the year—aka Frank the Tank—has stretched his career at Wisconsin as far as it can go. Today, 21-year-old senior is the new 40-year-old lingerer, and it's appropriate that a fourth-year star's nickname is borrowed from a 2003 Will Ferrell character who pledges a fraternity as part of a midlife crisis.

Incremental progressions such as Kaminsky's rarely happen anymore. Over four seasons he has gone from back-of-rotation nobody, to backup, to good enough to seriously consider the NBA draft, to the best player in the country—one whose game, unlike his father's, is very much of the moment. Kaminsky's senior-year shot chart is an exemplar for big men in the analytics age. The majority of his 18.2 points per game come from either his three-point hot spots (right wing and top of the key) or from within eight feet of the rim, set up by off-the-dribble basket attacks or post-ups. His versatility is



"I was scared to even go in the lane," Kaminsky says of his freshman season at Madison.

"If you saw me in there, it's because I got lost."



the key to the spacing of Wisconsin's offense, which ranks No. 1 nationally in adjusted offensive efficiency according to kenpom.com. Badgers coach Bo Ryan is a Hall of Fame finalist in large part because of his ability to optimize his offensive options and play to percentages, so when he says of Kaminsky, "He's mastered the art of shot selection," this is no small praise. Bo Ryan's declaring that you've mastered shot selection is akin to Phil Jackson's saying you've reached the fourth stage of enlightenment. Neither can be attained overnight.



FOUR SHADOWED

The son of a stretch power forward, Kaminsky III uses his length to protect the rim and his three-point shooting to keep defenses honest.



KAMINSKY BY THE NUMBERS

52

Blocks for Kaminsky this season, giving him 148 for his career, which broke the school record held by Jared Berggren (144).

1

Player in a major conference (Kaminsky) who leads his team in points, rebounds, assists, blocks and steals.

THIS HAS been the season of Kentucky and the season of Frank. The Wildcats and the Badgers parted ways last April 5 in the Final Four, after Aaron Harrison's dagger three sent Kentucky into the title game. As Kaminsky was on his way out of AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas, he yelled, "On Wisconsin!" into a quiet press room, and 25 days later he published a heartfelt, 1,219-word essay on his personal blog entitled "My Decision to Stay," citing his love of college and his unfulfilled goals of winning both the Big Ten title—he checked that off on Sunday with an 80–69 overtime win over Michigan State—and the national championship.

After a practice in October, Kaminsky was sporting a few days' worth of stubble, exhibiting the contentedness of someone who's exactly where he wants to be and thinking about how much his career contrasted with that of the youthful juggernaut that has since gone 34–0: "It's weird saying this, having made it to a Final Four, and being a decent player on a good team, but I don't think I ever would have made it at Kentucky," he said. "Because of the demands there to perform right away as a freshman, I'd have been out before I even started. I was an unheralded kid coming out of high school [at Benet Academy in Lisle, Ill.]. I had to work my way up at Wisconsin to the point where I could get minutes. I needed a few years to get my feet wet."

The freshman version of Kaminsky averaged just 7.7 minutes and 1.8 points. "I was scared to even go in the lane," Kaminsky says now. "If you saw me there, it's because I got lost." His first shot, against Kennesaw (Ga.) State on Nov. 12, 2011, was a missed three, and he attempted more treys (35) than twos (21) that season, a ratio that has been reversed for the rest of his career. As a sophomore reserve, Kaminsky had neither style (wearing a headband-and-rec-specs combo that he now concedes was terrible) nor the confidence of his coach. Fellow senior Dujie Dukan recalls a practice early in the '12–13 season in which Ryan became fed up with Kaminsky's long-range launches and told him, "I don't want you shooting unless it's late in the shot clock." On that day and many others, Kaminsky sat silently in the locker room after practice, overcome with frustration. "I've never worked as hard on anything as I have on basketball," he says. "It's always been what I loved. And it was a scary feeling, getting to a place where you wanted to be and then not being able to figure out how you fit in."

Struggling to fit in was the story of Kaminsky's young life. He was mocked for being an awkwardly tall kid and was rarely invited for elementary school play dates. He idolized Shaquille O'Neal but was so soft as a player that he was cut from his AAU team's travel roster the summer after his freshman year of high school. Kaminsky clowning around to try to endear himself to classmates. When he failed to win a Benet Academy student-government election—not for class president but rather director of intramurals—Kaminsky settled for a position as head of the Grilling Society, flipping burgers at football and baseball tailgates. And while he was at Madison, his



mother, Mary Kaminsky, a former volleyball player at Northwestern, could sense that her boy was trying to fit in on the court, rather than imposing his will on games.

They had a conversation in November of his junior year, Mary says, “about the difference between watching the game evolve and making things happen.” It was less than a week later that Kaminsky had the performance that lifted him out of anonymity, scoring a Badgers-record 43 points in a 103–85 win over North Dakota. That same season Ryan chided Kaminsky for a defensive miscue in practice and asked if he was going to be like Keaton Nankivil, a former Wisconsin forward who was talented offensively but never took charges. Kaminsky bristled at the comparison. “He looked me right in the eye,” Ryan says, “and told me, ‘I’m not Keaton Nankivil. I’m Frank Kaminsky!’”

There would have been no shame in just having a place in Wisconsin’s long procession of skilled big men, many of whom have gone on to careers in the NBA or abroad. But Kaminsky was developing his skill set and mind-set for something more: a senior year in which he’s the only major-conference player leading his team in points, rebounds (8.0), assists (2.7), blocks (1.6) and steals (0.9)—arguably the greatest season in Badgers’ history. Kaminsky never did find a way to fit in. He found he was better off standing out.

T HIS IS not to suggest that Kaminsky has acquired infinite wisdom. He’s still a college student, prone to making college-student mistakes. In mid-February he went to a pet store in Madison, fell in love and became the new owner of a beagle–Boston terrier mix puppy. Roommate Jordan Smith, a Badgers guard, contributed to the purchase, and they settled on the name Khali, which is short for Khaleesi, the mother of dragons in one of their favorite shows, *Game of Thrones*.

Smith says that Kaminsky was so hot and cold as a dog owner—cuddling with Khali one minute, then losing it over some act of mischief the next—“that our friends were putting the over/under on how long it would last at two weeks.” It was a push. Realizing the logistical impossibility of puppy training on a schedule that still had two early-March road games, the Big Ten tournament in Chicago and potentially three weeks of the NCAA tournament, Kaminsky called his mother and admitted, “This wasn’t such a good idea.” Mary, who’d tried to talk him out of it in the first place, did the saintly thing and agreed to take care of Khali at their home in Lisle. The plan is to reevaluate the situation when Kaminsky’s availability improves.

His current schedule has been cleared of nearly everything other than basketball. Kaminsky completed all requirements for his degree in

life science communications in December, his progress aided by a dearth of invites to elite sneaker camps or USA Basketball events that would have kept him out of summer school. Thus Frank the Tank is riding out his final semester at Wisconsin on academic autopilot,



CAREER CAPPER

Three of the Badgers’ seniors, (from left) Dukan, Kaminsky and Josh Gasser, celebrated their first conference tournament title.

his lone class an independent study in website design. Kaminsky’s final project involves coding a personal site that he can use during his pro career. He was dismayed to discover, however, that someone had already bought the domain name FrankKaminsky.com and is trying to auction it for \$1,000, roughly 100 times its base price. Research by this reporter revealed that the domain was purchased by a California speculator named Leonard Lee on Nov. 21, 2013, two days after seeing ESPN mention Kaminsky’s 43-point game against North Dakota. “I was surprised it was available,” says Lee, who has no plans to develop the domain. “He’s still in the news a lot, right? It’s good to see the guy doing well.” It was an investment that would eventually make Kaminsky a victim of the long-term stock rating he deserved when he came to Madison: buy and hold. □

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NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

PRIMED FOR THE PAINT

Duke freshman center Jahlil Okafor spent his high school years putting the shine on a dazzling array of throwback post moves, borrowed from some of the best in the game

BY LUKE WINN

Photograph by
Chris Keane
For Sports Illustrated

BACK TO THE FUTURE

A resurgence in low-block play could well depend on how well (and often) Jones sets up Okafor.

DID YOU notice what was missing? Or did the way UConn defeated Kentucky in last year's national championship game just seem normal? The victors in Arlington, Texas, scored 60 points, and *not a single one* came on a post-up. CBS made no mention of this fact in its broadcast, and it didn't inspire any think pieces that night or the following day. There was no moment of silence for back-to-the-basket, low-block scoring because it didn't perish all at once. It has been fading for years.

The last time a post-centric team won the national title was in 2009, when North Carolina relied on heavy doses of forwards Tyler Hansbrough and Deon Thompson. In the six seasons that Synergy Sports Technology has been widely tracking Division I games, the average team has gone from using 10.0% of its possessions on post-up scoring attempts (in '09-10) to 8.2% through



the end of the regular season, and film study confirms that back-to-the-basket play accounted for a much bigger portion of offense in the 1980s and '90s than it has in this millennium. The game goes through phases, and in its current one centers and power forwards roam farther from the basket. In basketball's original No-Post Era, before World War II, big men were viewed as little more than goonish impediments to a running sport. That changed with the emergence of George Mikan, a bespectacled, 6' 10" teenager who gave up plans to join the priesthood and began playing basketball at DePaul. The coach there, Ray Meyer, taught Mikan how to make unblockable hook shots with either hand, grooming him to become the 1945 and '46 national player of the year and later the NBA's original franchise center. The post movement began with Mikan, in Chicago, and if a revival takes place in this year's NCAA final, a product of Chicago is likely to be responsible.

BEFORE 6' 11" Jahlil Okafor arrived at Duke, spearheaded the country's best postcentric offense and became a finalist for the Naismith and Wooden awards as a freshman, he was an eighth-grader who'd already drawn the attention of Mikan's alma mater. In January 2010, Okafor went with his father, Chukwudi (Chucky, for short), to Allstate Arena, near O'Hare International Airport, for a Syracuse-DePaul

What the young Okafor needed was refinement. How he got it, says his dad, "was just one of those things that was meant to be."

game. The Okafors were there at the invitation of the Blue Demons' coaches. It is within NCAA rules to recruit eighth-graders, and Okafor, a 14-year-old in nearby Rosemont (Ill.) Elementary School District 78, had obvious appeal. He had already been excelling at national AAU events for five years and was 6' 7½" and 225 pounds. He was projected to reach 7' 2".

After the game Jahlil and Chucky met Tracy Webster, who was then DePaul's interim coach, outside the locker room. He extended a verbal scholarship offer to Jahlil—and when word got out to a local recruiting website a few weeks later, and then stories appeared on ESPNChicago.com and in the *Chicago Tribune*, Okafor's name was suddenly everywhere. The hype had arrived early, and it was not going



MEAL PLAN

Krzyzewski (below) had fun devising an offense that would feed Okafor down low, where he hasn't been as effective as a defender.



to subside. The important thing, Chucky felt, was to ensure that when his son did appear in college, he would prove the hype was warranted.

Chucky was a 6' 5" wing in college who, for various reasons, was kicked off the teams at all three of his stops—Westark Community College in Fort Smith, Ark.; Carl Albert State in Poteau, Okla. (a junior college); and West Texas A&M in Canyon. From 2004 to '12 he was a senior admissions adviser at American InterContinental University in suburban Chicago, and he would often train Jahlil in a gym near his office. Jahlil had put in enough work on his vertical that he was dunking by the sixth grade, but as an eighth-grader he was reliant on just one post move: "Face up, jab-step right, dribble left, and spin back right," Jahlil says. "I just kept doing that no matter what the situation was."

What Okafor needed was refinement. How he got it, says Chucky, "was just one of those things that was meant to be." A coworker at AIU had recently gone to Rick Lewis, a trainer in Chesterton, Ind., for weight-loss workouts; because Lewis was also a basketball skill-development guru and the son of a famed high school coach in East St. Louis, Ill., the coworker recommended him to Chucky for Jahlil. When the Okafors drove to Indiana in February 2010 for a trial run, they found a trainer whose idea of what Okafor could become meshed with their own. Chucky, whose father was a Nigerian immigrant, had





MOVING TARGET

On Okafor's favorite scoring progression, defenders who know what's coming are still almost powerless to stop him.

with great touch and, as Lewis puts it, a frame “that’s solid from his big toe to his forehead.” But Okafor’s preternatural ability to take what he learned in these drills and almost immediately use the moves in games took him to another level. He went from not being able to dunk with his left hand, to learning the proper steps with Lewis, to throwing down a lefty jam on a one-bounce attack from the left block in an eighth-grade tournament—all in a matter of *days*. With repetition and time Okafor’s game-usable options have become complex and polished enough to resemble some of Chucky and Lewis’s historic references. When you see Okafor now as a Duke freshman in the post, where he has scored 274 of his 567 points through the end of the ACC tournament, averaging 17.7 per game, don’t mistake his maneuvering as improv. What he’s doing is strategic sampling.

That move from a Dec. 3 win at Wisconsin, when Okafor caught the ball just off the left block against his prime competition for the national player of the year awards, 7-footer Frank Kaminsky, drove hard (left) along the baseline, sensed that Kaminsky was taking away the reverse, planted hard and pivoted 180 degrees back for a left-side layin? That was a slightly less graceful Okafor.

When Okafor received a feed off either block against North Carolina or Virginia or almost all of the opponents who double-teamed him, and waited . . . and extended the ball out with one hand . . . and waited . . . to see if a second defender was going to commit, before making a decision to pass to an open shooter or attack? That’s Old Kareem, from the stage of his career when he was an adept distributor.

And when Okafor begins his favorite scoring progression, starting from the right block, turning his right shoulder in and dribbling with his left hand—and then either spins back right for a layup or hook, or powers directly through his defender’s body, or

been showing Jahlil YouTube videos of Hakeem Olajuwon, and Lewis was also an admirer of classic big men: Olajuwon, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Ralph Sampson, Patrick Ewing and Tim Duncan. The plan for Jahlil was to draw on those influences to make him a complete, throwback center—and it started with his feet.

“People will say now on TV, Oh, my god, how does he have such great footwork for a big man?” the 55-year-old Lewis says. “It’s because he’s been doing these drills for five years. Jahlil is not by happenstance. He’s by design.”

The design began with cones on the floor of a YMCA gym in Chesterton, and continued in gyms in Chicago, including at Whitney Young High, where Jahlil enrolled the following fall and both Chucky and Lewis became assistant coaches. The cones were guides that helped lengthen Okafor’s strides and trained him to use crossover (rather than shuffle) steps when he faced up and attacked diagonally off the bounce. They also established patterns for post moves that could be mirrored on either side of the basket and finished with either hand.

Jahlil might have been on a pro trajectory no matter what. He has the rare combination of height, wingspan (7’ 5”), softball-glove-sized hands

Okafor went from not being able to dunk with his left hand, to learning the proper steps, to throwing down a lefty jam—all in a matter of days.

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From left:
Embiid, Griffin,
Davis and Oden



POST PRODUCTION PHASE

SI's analysis of the last nine seasons of post-up possessions per game shows that Okafor is tied for the most among freshmen who went on to be lottery picks

**Minimum 25 games logged by Synergy Sports; freshmen stats only*

SEASON	PLAYER	TEAM	GAMES	POSS.	PPP	POSS./G
2006-07	GREG ODEN	OHIO STATE	32	286	1.042	8.9
2014-15	JAHILIL OKAFOR	DUKE	32	286	0.958	8.9
2007-08	MICHAEL BEASLEY	KANSAS STATE	32	200	1.160	6.3
2007-08	BLAKE GRIFFIN	OKLAHOMA	27	157	0.930	5.8
2009-10	DEMARCUS COUSINS	KENTUCKY	38	198	0.934	5.2
2013-14	JOEL EMBIID	KANSAS	29	150	0.947	5.2
2010-11	TRISTAN THOMPSON	TEXAS	35	176	0.733	5.0
2007-08	KEVIN LOVE	UCLA	35	163	1.037	4.7
2011-12	CODY ZELLER	INDIANA	36	153	0.941	4.3
2009-10	DERRICK FAVORS	GEORGIA TECH	32	135	0.844	4.2
2011-12	ANTHONY DAVIS	KENTUCKY	42	66	0.848	1.6

dribbles into the middle of the lane for a scoop shot? That's Duncan, but not in the sense that it's a mirror image of Duncan. It's only in the sense that everyone knows what Okafor's options are, yet no one defender can thwart him.

JAH, LET'S do 10 Timmy D's. This is the order Duke associate head coach Jeff Capel gives to Okafor after nearly every practice, and this Monday afternoon in March is no different. Okafor is taking bank shots from a spot between the left block and left wing while Capel critiques his mechanics: the bend in Okafor's knees, the flick of his wrist, the arc on his release. Capel frequently instructs Okafor to make a prescribed number of Duncan's signature shot—a face-up jumper off the glass—because it's valuable against defenders who sag.

This is one of the few weapons Okafor did not have when he came to Durham but he added it to his arsenal in no time. He hit a Timmy D for his first post-up bucket at Duke, in the opener against Presbyterian, and made it a staple of his repertoire. When Spurs legend David Robinson visited Duke with his son, Justin, who's joining the team as a walk-on next season, the Admiral told Okafor he reminded him of Duncan.

This was meaningful to Okafor. Duncan is his lone influence who's an active NBA player, and when Okafor immersed himself in basketball as an escape from the emotional toll of having his mother, Dacresha Benton, die from complications from bronchitis when he was nine, he would shoot alone on Chicago courts and pretend he was making post moves against Duncan. "The imaginary Duncan didn't have anything on me," Okafor says, "but the real one definitely does."

The real one does *now*. But as a freshman post scorer in the ACC? No way. The 6' 11" Duncan was a redshirt candidate at Wake Forest in 1993–94 until high-profile frontcourt recruit Makhtar N'Diaye was ruled ineligible. Duncan scored no points in his college debut against Alaska-Anchorage and averaged 9.8 points that first season as an auxiliary option to star guard Randolph Childress. Capel, whose Duke playing career overlapped Duncan's at Wake, says, "There's no comparison at the same stage: [Okafor] is way more advanced



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offensively.” (Defense, where Okafor has struggled, is a different story—but that’s for a different story.)

Duke knew long before Okafor arrived that he could be an immediate offensive centerpiece. As a 17-year-old on the gold-medal-winning team at the 2013 FIBA U19 world championships in Prague, Okafor shot 77.2% from the field and was an all-tournament selection. “He was playing against guys two years older, with an NBA-sized lane, and he was still dominant in the post,” says Florida’s Billy Donovan, who coached the U19s. The last time the Blue Devils had a true superstar center was Elton Brand, and it wasn’t until his sophomore season (1998–99) that he could anchor a post-heavy offense. “Jah was accomplished right away in the post,” says Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski. “We knew we had the best player in the country coming in . . . and it was going to be fun coming up with a system where [feeding him] is the first option.”

Duke’s guards have been committed to providing for Jah. According to Synergy Sports Technology, he finishes 8.9 post-up possessions per game, more than any player in the NCAA tournament and more than any freshman big man who became a lottery pick in the past five drafts (*page 43*). Because the Blue Devils are the lone college team to install SportVU, the laser-tracking system that has revolutionized NBA statistics, they have richer analytics that reinforce Okafor’s value. According to a data set provided to SI by Duke’s basketball director of information technology, Kevin Cullen, covering 15 home games and four others in NBA arenas with SportVU, the team averaged 1.29 points on possessions in which Okafor gets a post touch and 1.18 points when he doesn’t. This is why Okafor has received the ball in the post an average of 18.3 times per 36 minutes; the post-up volume of the NBA’s leader in that department, the Hornets’ Al Jefferson, is 16.9 posts per 36 minutes. The SportVU data shows Okafor being functional from both blocks, too: 53.5% of his post-ups have been on the left side (with a team efficiency of 1.34 PPP) and 46.5% have been on the right (with an efficiency of 1.24 PPP).

Okafor’s most frequent supplier is freshman point guard Tyus Jones, whose passes have led to 30.2% of the big man’s points in the regular

WAIT FOR IT
Okafor's size and strength enable him to hold the ball long enough to determine whether it's best to pass or to start a post move.



season. The first time Jones, who’s from Apple Valley, Minn., fed Okafor in the post was during the fall of their ninth-grade season, when they participated in a USA Basketball camp in Colorado Springs. They developed such a bond during national-team and AAU events over the next three years that they became the greatest package deal in recruiting history: the No. 1 center and No. 1 point guard committing to Duke in simultaneous press conferences held 344 miles apart on Nov. 15, 2013. One thing Jones loved about Okafor was that *he knew who he was*. If that sounds insignificant, you haven’t seen how many AAU games are marred by the perimeter delusions of oversized players.

“Jahlil is one of the few big guys nowadays who takes pride in being a low-post big man,” Jones says. “That’s what separates him: that he’s accepted what his best position is and is trying to perfect that craft.”

The low post, Okafor says, “is where I feel like I belong.”

OKAFOR’S GROWTH didn’t come in spurts. He has been bigger than everyone else on the floor from the time he

played on his first team, a second-grade club sponsored by baby-food manufacturer Gerber, in Fort Smith, Ark., where he lived with his mother. It’s always made sense to stay close to the basket. And as anyone who’s coached Okafor has realized, he’s not interested in volume shooting; he’s interested in shots he’s *unlikely to miss*.

“The kid is a perfectionist,” Chucky says. “I used to want him to step out because he’s so skilled, but he wants to do what’ll give him the best chance of going 100% in a game.” As a Duke freshman Okafor has hit 75.2% of his shots at the rim and 66.9% of his attempts overall, giving him the second-highest field goal percentage of any player in a major conference.

Okafor has a slow, baritone laugh befitting a much older giant. His idea of a joke, one that’s been running between him and the Duke coaches since he was in high school, is that his alter ego is *Kyrie Okafor*: That, if



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32 ADVANCE.

16 PERSIST.

8 PERSEVERE.

4 SUCCEED.

2 PREVAIL.



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MIDWEST

KENTUCKY 1	MANHATTAN 16	CINCINNATI 8	PURDUE 9	WEST VIRGINIA 5	BUFFALO 12	MARYLAND 4	VALPARAISO 13	BUTLER 6	TEXAS 11	NOTRE DAME 3	NORTHEASTERN 14	WICHITA STATE 7	INDIANA 10	KANSAS 2	NEW MEXICO STATE 15
KENTUCKY 1	PURDUE 9	WEST VIRGINIA 5	VALPARAISO 13	BUTLER 6	NOTRE DAME 3	WICHITA STATE 7	KANSAS 2								

KENTUCKY

Boilers like to post up, but that won't work against UK.

WEST VIRGINIA

Crusaders not equipped for "Press" Virginia's chaos.

BUTLER

Bulldogs F Roosevelt Jones wins Indiana bragging rights.

WICHITA STATE

KU will keep avoiding the Shockers in regular season.



◀ **KENTUCKY**
WVU is the latest to learn that playing fast with the Cats is a sure way to lose.

WICHITA STATE ▶
WSU may not have as gaudy a record as last season's, but its defense is as tough.



SWE
SIXTE

ELITE EIGHT



KENTUCKY

All the upset karma in the world—and the Shockers have plenty after last year's round-of-32 heartbreak—isn't enough to stop the Cats.

PLAY-IN GAMES



MIDWEST



WEST

FINAL FOUR



KENTUCKY

What luck! Arizona coach Sean Miller runs into one of the best Final Four and runs into one of the best all time—and one of just two!

WEST

NEW MEXICO STATE



WISCONSIN

We're only making plans for Nigel (Hayes) to light up UO.

NORTH CAROLINA

Surging Heels are not the No. 4 seed the Hogs wanted.

BAYLOR

F Rico Gathers's offensive glasswork carries the Bears.

ARIZONA

Rams don't fare well against Pack-Line defenses.



◀ **WISCONSIN**
UNC's Kennedy Meeks is tanklike but still no match for UW's Frank Kaminsky.

ARIZONA ▶
The Cats' Brandon Ashley and Stanley Johnson shred the BU zone with ease.



ARIZONA

'Zona lost to the Badgers last March, but senior point guard T.J. McConnell is playing the best ball of his career and keeping the offense afloat.



20
CHAM

Kent

The Wildcats looked beatable at times in 2014-15 but easily than it did Arizona, Kentucky completes the

PACKETS

EAST



VILLANOVA

'Nova's perimeter D thwarts Trevor Lacey's isolation game.

NORTHERN IOWA

The Cards lack the shooters to burn UNI's Pack-Line D.

OKLAHOMA

Sooners G Buddy Hield is lights out in a shootout.

VIRGINIA

Tom Izzo's Spartans take the ACC champs to the wire.



◀ **VILLANOVA**
Wildcats F Daniel Ochefu's savvy passes are the key to felling the Panthers.

VIRGINIA ▶
The Cavs' D excels at taking away transition, and OU's half-court offense is subpar.



SW
SIXT



15
PION



VIRGINIA

Now fully recovered from broken left pinkie and an appendectomy, guard Justin Anderson delivers scoring when UVa needs it most.



DU

Virginia's frontcourt double-t... the stage for heroics from t... point guard, Blue Devils fres

ucky

never in their biggest games. Discarding Duke more first undefeated season since Indiana's in 1975-76.

SOUTH



DUKE

Aztecs are in Duke's backyard, and 2,100 miles from home.

UTAH

Eagles' super scorer Tyler Harvey runs out of magic.

IOWA STATE

ISU's Monte Morris out-assists SMU's Nic Moore.

GONZAGA

Zags prevail in matchup of international rosters.



◀ **DUKE**
Jahlil Okafor outduels Utes 7-footer Jakob Poeltl in battle of one-and-dones.

GONZAGA ▶
Cyclones' comeback mojo finally runs out in highest-scoring Sweet 16 game.



DUKE

Blue Devils rule on the road this season, winning at Wisconsin, Virginia, Louisville—and now this neutral-court escape of the Zags.



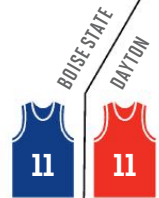
DUKE

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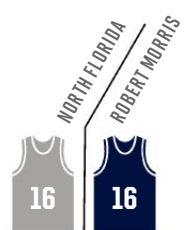
FINAL FOUR

ELITE EIGHT

PLAY-IN GAMES



EAST



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they would only loosen the reins, he could pull down defensive boards and run the point by himself, in the manner of former Blue Devil and current Cleveland Cavalier Kyrie Irving. But again, this is a joke. When Okafor studies other players on film, he prefers to watch not Irving or LeBron James but rather the post players to whom he was introduced by Chucky and Rick Lewis.

One morning earlier this month in the pressroom at Cameron, Okafor was reviewing old footage on a reporter's laptop, laughing as college Duncan—the polished, upperclassman version—destroyed Duke with close-range moves. Timmy D tape, to Okafor, isn't boring. "This is fun," he says, taking multiple looks at Duncan executing a perfect, turnaround-fadeaway bank shot against Stanford. "This is *relevant* to me." At the behest of Coach K and Capel, Okafor has been doing more of what they call "Shaq-posting"—using his physical advantage to bully defenders for easy points—but he prefers post craftsmanship to brute force.

When it came to artistry and natural feel, Olajuwon was the master, and as the reel transitions to clips of the former Rockets center, Okafor nods

JAH RULES

The No. 1 recruit entering the season, Okafor has more than met expectations, earning the Cameron Crazies' love and player of the year consideration.

in silent regard. After the Dream's feign-middle, spin-baseline move on the left block leaves first the Celtics' Kevin McHale, then the Suns' Tom Chambers frozen and helpless, Okafor is asked what he's focusing on. "[Olajuwon's] inside foot," he says.

"Before he caught the ball, he felt the defender and already knew he was going to spin." It takes a pause-and-rewind for the reporter to catch what Okafor saw right away: Olajuwon turning his right foot perpendicular to the baseline to set up each dunk. Okafor pulled off an approximation of this spin earlier in the season, but there are many other Dream combos he's still trying to process. He exhales audibly after watching a five-parter in which Olajuwon drags Robinson out to the left corner, faces up, crosses him over, fakes a reverse, pivots back and adds another shot fake before scoring. "Unreal, how fluid that is," Okafor says. "Can I see that again?"

As the clip plays a second time, Okafor is asked how old he was when it happened. The overlay graphic says Olajuwon made that move in the height of the NBA's post era, during the Western Conference finals in 1995. "I wasn't born until that December," he says, "but I was on my way." □



NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

ON GUARDS!

In filling out your bracket, consider backcourt matchups the key to advancement. History tells us that the team that wins it all has a standout ballhandler leading the charge

BY PHIL TAYLOR

Photograph by
Michael Hickey
Getty Images

GRANT SLAM

Thanks to the senior point guard's all-around excellence, the Irish had their most wins (29) since 1908-09.





KENTUCKY COACH John Calipari won a national championship three years ago thanks largely to the defensive domination of 6' 10" Anthony Davis, whose arms are as long as fire hoses. Cal's current undefeated, top-ranked Wildcats are heavily favored to win another title by making good use of rim protectors such as 7-foot Willie Cauley-Stein and 6' 11" Karl-Anthony Towns. Given all that length, you might expect Calipari to stress the importance of big men in navigating the minefield that is the NCAA tournament. You would be wrong. "You want to have everything," he says. "But in the tournament, if you have poor guard play, you're not getting where you want to go. It will come back to bite you. You cannot survive for long if your guards are anything less than first-rate."

So fill out your tournament brackets based on any criteria you choose, from adjusted defensive efficiency and effective field goal percentage to school colors and mascot toughness. But before making any final decisions, it would be wise to remember that backcourt stars are almost always essential to March Madness success. In every matchup, take a good look at the guards.

"It's not that complicated," says former coach Jim Calhoun, who won three national titles with Connecticut. "The players who have the ball in their hands the most are the ones who end up turning the game." Think about solving different kinds of zones, about making decisions on the high screen-and-roll, about stopping dribble penetration, about feeding the post. Says Calhoun, "Your success at all of that begins with your guards."

Point guard Shabazz Napier led UConn to the title last season. Louisville won in 2013 with Peyton Siva and Russ Smith providing the backcourt motor for the Cardinals' up-tempo game. The Huskies of '11 relied on Kemba Walker's ability to break down defenses. Senior shooting guard Nolan Smith's defense and playmaking were instrumental in Duke's '10 title run. Ty Lawson orchestrated North Carolina's win over Michigan State in the '09 title game. In '08, Mario Chalmers's clutch shooting carried Kansas to a finals win over Memphis. Calipari's '12 Wildcats are the only one of the last seven champions that didn't have a superior backcourt as its foundation.

There are many ways a stellar guard can dominate a Big Dance game—passing, shooting, defense or just all-around excellence. Using past tournament stars as a guide, SI identified the ballhandlers to watch over the next few weeks.



Defenders

CLOSING OUT on a shooter or fighting over a screen isn't the kind of maneuver that typically makes the "One Shining Moment" montage, but defensive excellence has been a reliable predictor of success in the tournament. Four of the last five national champions ranked 10th or higher in adjusted defensive efficiency, and guards who can apply pressure on the ballhandler and stop penetration are key elements of effective D.

No guard in recent years has been more disruptive than Oklahoma's Mookie Blaylock was. The Sooners reached the championship game in 1988 and the Sweet 16 in '89 with Blaylock leading a full-court pressure defense that accumulated 486 steals and transformed turnovers into points in a hurry. Blaylock's 23 steals during the '88 Final Four run are the most in a single tournament, and he averaged 3.6 steals in his nine tournament games.

Two of the better backcourt ball hawks in this year's field come off the bench. Freshman Jevon Carter (6' 2", 185 pounds) leads West Virginia in steals despite playing only 24.0 minutes per game; his chase-down block of Kansas's Frank Mason III on March 3 was one of the defensive highlights of the season. Tyler Ulis, Kentucky's 5' 9" backcourt pest, makes a big impact despite his small frame. Against Providence in January, the Wildcats were leading 17-15 after the first 13 minutes. Over the game's final 27 minutes, of which Ulis played 16, the Friars went cold, missing 25 of their final 29 shots. "The biggest difference was Ulis," Friars coach Ed Cooley says. "He changed the flow of the game with his ball pressure, and we couldn't get in a rhythm after that. The rest of their defense seemed to feed off him."

Arizona point guard T.J. McConnell, the Wildcats' undisputed leader, plays a more central role than Carter or Ulis, and he shares Blaylock's knack for thievery. Although his Twitter handle is @iPass4Zona, McConnell is just as adept at getting his hands on opponents' passes. He is 21st in the nation in steals with 2.1 per game. The Wildcats were 46th and 41st in adjusted defensive efficiency the two seasons before McConnell arrived; since then they have been first and third. "He's very good on the ball, but it's not just that," says Arizona coach Sean Miller. "T.J. is a great team defender. His help defense, his ability to play passing lanes, his talking to other teammates



BLAYLOCK BY THE NUMBERS

7

Steals in the 83-79 NCAA final loss to Kansas in 1988, a title-game record until UNC's Ty Lawson had eight in 2009.

72

Steals for Blaylock's Sooners during their six-game run in '88, which is still the most for a team in the tournament.



CONTAINMENT POLICY

The pressure applied by Ulis (above) and McConnell (right) has helped their respective Wildcats become two of the nation's most efficient defensive teams.

on defense—they all raise the overall level of our play."

McConnell, who had eight steals in a win over Oregon State in January, has added an element of toughness to the Arizona defense that was hard to envision when he was a skinny 6' 1" transfer from Duquesne. But now the 195-pound bruiser sets the tone for an aggressive, stifling half-court D. It's not just that McConnell is known for his willingness to fight through screens and go chest-to-chest with offensive players, it's that he has a tough skin after playing for a hard-driving, demanding coach in high school: his father, Tim. McConnell is a floor-diving, charge-taking demon, the kind of player who can provide the sort of inspirational play that can spark an instant shift in momentum.

The Playmakers

WHEN BOBBY HURLEY began his coaching career as an assistant at Wagner in 2010-11, he realized that none of the players he was recruiting were old enough to remember him as a point guard at Duke, where he won national championships in 1991 and '92. "I told them to check me out on Google and YouTube if they wanted to see what I used to do," says Hurley, now the Buffalo coach.







WILLIAM PURNELL/CON SPORTSWIRE (VANVLEET); JOHN BIEVER FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (HURLEY)

VANGUARD

It's impossible to overstate the value of a steady hand like VanVleet, who has shown the ability to take control during the madness of March.

Those who did their research saw a guard who could distribute the ball as well as anyone ever has in March: Hurley is the alltime leader in NCAA tournament assists, with 145. Christian Laettner's game-winning turnaround jumper in the Blue Devils' epic 104-103 victory over Kentucky in the 1992 Elite Eight is

frequently cited as the best shot in tournament history, but what is often overlooked is that Hurley had 22 points and 10 assists in that game and went on to be named the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player.

This year's field has several playmakers who run their offenses as superbly as Hurley did, while keeping miscues to a minimum, qualities that can lead to long tournament life. Iowa State sophomore Monte Morris, for instance, is so mistake-free that he probably never needs autocorrect when he's texting. The 6' 2" Morris set the assist-to-turnover record as a freshman (4.79), and this year he has been even more reliable (4.91). The value of each possession in the tournament won't be lost on Morris, who often talks of "cherishing" the ball when it's in his hands.

Virginia sophomore point guard London Perrantes is almost as trustworthy. Nicknamed Slow-Mo for his unhurried style, Perrantes is the perfect fit for an ultradeliberate offense designed to limit the number of possessions—which means the Cavaliers can't afford to waste any of them. Perrantes, who is 14th in the country in assist-to-turnover ratio, makes sure they don't.

But Wichita State point guard Fred VanVleet, who played 23 minutes off the bench in the Final Four as a freshman two seasons ago, is the player who most resembles Hurley. VanVleet, a junior, already holds the school record for assists (452), and his assist-to-turnover ratio of 3.21 ranks seventh nationally. Like Hurley, VanVleet lacks flash but makes up for it in precision. He's so familiar with his teammates' preferences that he calibrates his passes according to which Shocker is the target. He knows that senior shooting guard Ron Baker likes firm feeds, for instance, while senior guard Tekele Cotton prefers softer ones. Baker raves about how VanVleet's passes arrive with perfect rotation, spinning like a jump shot that he merely has to redirect. VanVleet's deliveries are so artfully placed,



HURLEY BY THE NUMBERS

7.3

Assist average in the NCAA tournament (145 total) over 20 games, during which the Blue Devils went 18-2 and made three title games.

42

Three-pointers made in the Big Dance, third on the career list. Hurley's percentage from beyond the arc was 43.8.

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ON GUARDS!



PROTECTOR OF THE ROCK

The Cyclones are one of the fastest teams in Division I, making Morris's record-setting assist-to-turnover ratio even more impressive.

junior center Bush Wamukota told *The Wichita Eagle*, that "if you don't finish you feel bad about it."

Point guards such as VanVleet provide a psychological benefit that can't be measured. "When you have a guy out there who's in control and knows how to get easy shots for his teammates, it can settle everybody down," says Milwaukee Bucks coach Jason Kidd, who was just such a point guard for Cal when the Golden Bears made their trip to the Sweet 16 in 1993. "A good point guard can take away that nervousness that comes with being in the tournament."

Total Packages

THE MOST precious commodity in the tournament is a guard who can take over a game in a variety of ways. This year's field is populated with a rare few who can do exactly that, in the manner of the ultimate do-everything player, Magic Johnson. Michigan State won the 1979 national title on the strength of Johnson's remarkable tournament run in which he drove and dished like a point guard, rebounded like a power forward and scored whenever he felt it was necessary. In five games Johnson had two triple doubles and two double doubles. For good measure he outdueled Larry Bird with 24 points, seven rebounds and five assists in the Spartans' 75-64 championship game victory over Indiana State.

Delon Wright of Utah, a 6' 5" senior who puts his height and wingspan to good use at both ends of the floor, has a bit of Magic-like versatility. He can see over smaller defenders to

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pass, which helped him lead the Utes in assists the last two seasons, and though his jump shot is inconsistent (37.1% from three), he's a capable scorer because of his ability to change speeds and shake defenders. Defensively, Wright is often assigned to the opposing team's best perimeter scorer, usually with positive results. He led all point guards in blocked shots in the 2013–14 season with 1.3 per game, and he is 24th in the country this year with an average of 2.1 steals. If the Utes are in desperate need of a bucket, a block, a steal or an assist in the late stages of a tournament game, Wright is the best bet to supply it.

As fine a defender as Wright is, neither he nor the rest of the Utes could contain Oregon's Joseph Young in the semifinals of the Pac-12 tournament. Young, a 6' 2" senior, drilled a three-pointer with 1.1 seconds left to beat Utah 67–64 last Friday night. It was a typical Young performance in that his 25 points came in a variety of ways—on drives, on mid-range pull-ups and on threes. Young edged White and Arizona's McConnell for conference player of the year because he lifted the Ducks, picked eighth in a preseason Pac-12 media poll, to a second-place finish with his offensive versatility. Keep in mind that he is nearly automatic from the free throw line (91.8%), a critical skill in the Big Dance.

If Young or anyone else rescues his team as dramatically as Notre Dame's 6' 5" senior Jerian Grant did against Louisville as a sophomore, when he scored 12 points in 28 seconds to wipe out an eight-point deficit and send the game into overtime, he will become a tournament legend. As heroic as that sequence was, it didn't do justice to Grant's all-around game. He's a natural scorer—his 16.8 points per game leads the team—but he's enough of a playmaker to lead the ACC in assists at 6.6 per game. Grant sat out the final 20 games of last season due to an academic-related suspension, but he has made the most of his return. "We shoot 40% from three," says Notre Dame coach Mike Brey. "Why? Jerian's back. He gets guys easy looks." The son of former NBA forward Harvey Grant and the nephew of ex-Chicago Bulls star Horace Grant, he's also an excellent perimeter ball



MAGIC BY THE NUMBERS

2

Unofficial triple doubles by Johnson during his five games in the 1979 tournament. (Assists were not formally tracked until '83–84.)

38

Percentage of televisions in the U.S. that were tuned to the Michigan State–Indiana State NCAA title game, the highest ever.



SPECIAL D'LIVERY

Russell led the Buckeyes in points and rebounds, supporting his own case that he's the nation's best freshman.

hawk whose 1.8 steals leads the team. "He's one of the best defenders I've ever coached," says Brey.

Ohio State may turn to its all-purpose freshman, D'Angelo Russell, for similar production. Russell has a star's confidence—asked earlier this month if he was the nation's best freshman, he said, "Oh, yes. No doubt"—and the game to back it up. He leads the Buckeyes in scoring (19.3) and rebounding (5.6) and is second in three-point percentage (41.6) and assists (5.2), and at 6' 5" and with a 6' 9" wingspan, he has the size to guard any position on the perimeter. He also clearly has the vision and passing ability to handle the point, as he has shown with some otherworldly passes this season.

Against Northwestern on Jan. 22, Russell stood outside the three-point line, palming the ball in his left hand with his arm outstretched to keep it away from his defender like a big brother teasing a younger sibling. Then with a flick of his wrist he threw a diagonal bounce pass, with backspin, that threaded through three defenders to find senior forward Sam Thompson cutting to the basket. It was such an impressive sleight of hand that it seemed as if the video had been edited. "He just keeps doing things that make people say, Wow," says Ohio State coach Thad Matta. "The most impressive thing about him is his rate of improvement. The strides he's taken since Day One here are remarkable."

The Buckeyes will have to make the most of those



UTE MOVEMENT

The 6'5" Wright might not be a knockdown shooter, but he knows how to change speeds to get into the lane.

improvements over the next few weeks, because this will almost certainly be Russell's only NCAA tournament. He's a hot enough pro prospect that Knicks president Phil Jackson attended an Ohio State game to evaluate him. Jackson's innocuous comments that Russell was "a great-looking kid" and "a great prospect" earned him a fine for violating the NBA's rule against speaking publicly about college underclassmen. But it doesn't take an NBA executive to realize that Russell is the kind of multitalented player who could take the Buckeyes to Indianapolis.

The Shooters

LONG-RANGE gunners have provided some of the tournament's most dramatic moments. Sometimes they hit buzzer beaters, like Bryce Drew's 23-foot trey for Valparaiso that beat Ole Miss 70–69 in 1998. Sometimes they take gutsy, go-for-it shots, like T.J. Sorrentine's deep three that helped seal 13th-seeded Vermont's upset of No. 4 seed Syracuse in 2005. Or Ali Farokhmanesh's cold-blooded transition trifecta for Northern Iowa with 35 seconds left against top-seeded Kansas in '10, a risky choice when he could have held the ball with a one-point lead and milked the clock.

Then there are the players who just can't miss. "Every coach in the tournament gets nightmares about facing a kid who gets in a zone and starts making everything," says Calhoun. "I've seen it from both sides. It can make you or break you."

When a shooter gets hot enough, he can carry a team, as a then relatively little-known guard named Steph Curry did for Davidson



in 2008. The Wildcats were seeded 10th in the Midwest region when Curry shot them past three higher seeds, Gonzaga, Georgetown and Wisconsin, to reach the Elite Eight. He torched the Zags for 40 points, making eight of his 10 three-point attempts, then dropped 30 more on the Hoyas in the second round. “For the most part he had guys all over him and the ball was going in,” Hoyas coach John Thompson III said at the time. Curry then dispatched the Badgers with 33 points on 6-of-11 three-point shooting before Davidson was finally eliminated by Kansas.

There are several players capable of such a streak this March. Duke senior Quinn Cook and Michigan State junior Denzel Valentine have each made 40% of their threes this season. Junior Marcus Paige, the only consistent three-point shooter in North Carolina’s rotation, has hit 51.5% of his team’s threes, the second consecutive season that he’s been responsible for more than half the Tar Heels’ treys. Paige’s jumper has deserted him at times—he shot 2 for 10 on threes and 5 for 22 overall in losses to Pitt and Duke last month—which may have been partly due to the plantar fasciitis in his right foot that has bothered him for most of the season. But if he shoots well from beyond the arc in the tournament, the Tar Heels will be especially tough. During the regular season he made 40.5% of his threes in UNC’s victories. In its losses, that number dropped to 34.6%.

Gonzaga has a team full of marksmen—the Zags shot 40.8% from beyond the arc—but its most accomplished shooter is senior point guard Kevin Pangos, who set the school career record for three-pointers (313) this season. Pangos is far from a gunner—he took only one shot in a win over Santa Clara and just two in a victory over Pacific last month—but when the situation calls for it, he can provide threes in bunches. The 6' 2" Canadian proved that in his first start as a freshman, when he made nine of 13 triples against Washington State. “He has that perfect form that makes you think it’s going in every time,” says Gonzaga forward Kyle Wiltjer, who shot

THE AIM OF THE GAME

North Carolina's fate likely rests on the marksmanship of Paige, who has taken more than three times as many threes as any other Tar Heel.



46.6% from behind the arc himself. “He can definitely carry us when he gets hot.”

But the best bet for a bracket-busting barrage of threes à la Curry might be Lawrence Alexander, North Dakota State’s 6' 3" junior guard, who shot the Bison into the tournament by making six of his nine three-point attempts in a 57–56 win over South Dakota State in the Summit League championship game. Alexander shoots 44.1% from behind the arc, and he’s already proved how dangerous he can be in the Big Dance. Last season he went 4 for 7 on threes and scored 25 points in North Dakota State’s 80–75 first-round upset of fifth-seeded Oklahoma. Alexander has permission to hoist threes freely—he shot at least eight in 15 of the Bison’s 32 games, including five games in which he took 11—and when he’s hot, which is often, North Dakota State’s deliberate motion offense can break an opponent’s spirit.

The four teams that get to Indy are all likely to have a set of guards who have distinguished themselves along the way in at least one category, like so many great backcourtmen before them. The next three weeks will remind us of the tournament’s history while we find out which guards are ready to make some of their own. □

CURRY BY THE NUMBERS

5.8

Three-pointers made per game by Curry for 10th-seeded Davidson in 2008, tied with Loyola Marymount’s Jeff Fryer (1990) for most all time.

32.0

Scoring average for Curry in '08 over four games, the most points per game in the Big Dance since Bo Kimble’s 35.8 for LMU in '90.



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NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW



WRITTEN IN THE STARS

Breanna Stewart of UConn has the gaudiest credentials in the field, but that doesn't mean she matters most in deciding who wins the title—even on her own team

BY LINDSAY SCHNELL

Photograph by
David Butler II
USA Today Sports

COMES TO A PRETTY PASS

Known more as a defender early in her career, Jefferson has become an adept distributor, leading her conference with 4.8 assists per game.

B

AYLOR COACH Kim Mulkey isn't sure what to expect in this year's NCAA women's tournament. Ditto for Louisville's Jeff Walz. Yes, Connecticut is the favorite, but who knows which teams will meet the Huskies in the Final Four? "Wide open," Walz says. "An exciting time in women's basketball," Mulkey adds.

Think UConn is the only team stacked with skilled players? Think again. Speedy point guard Moriah Jefferson makes Huskies games must-see TV, but other talents, and other teams, are worthy of attention too. This year's national player of the year will be a junior, but it's more likely to be Notre Dame shooting guard Jewell Loyd than Connecticut forward Breanna Stewart. South Carolina junior point guard Tiffany Mitchell has already taken the No. 3-ranked Gamecocks higher in the polls than they've ever been; now she could lead



them to their first Final Four. Motivated by an injured teammate, Tennessee senior forward Cierra Burdick is on a mission to get the Lady Vols back to the Final Four. And undersized (5' 11") sophomore forward Nina Davis wasn't heavily recruited, but she's been practically a double double machine at Baylor.

All five players are capable of taking their teams deep into the tournament. "There have been enough national championships won in the last 10 years by programs nobody thought could do it that we're starting to understand if teams get on a roll, anything can happen," Mulkey says. As the talent level around the country continues to rise, more and more brackets are likely to go bust. But why wait for the future?

WITH RESPECT to Stewart, the reigning national player of the year, the Huskies can't win another title without a significant contribution from the 5' 7" Jefferson, who might be just as quick *with* the ball as without it. "Her speed and acceleration—that's a huge part of what we do," says sophomore forward Morgan Tuck, who calls Jefferson the "unsung hero" of the team. "She's so comfortable, even going really fast." Stewart, the leading scorer (17.4 points per game) and rebounder (7.3), creates matchup problems not just because of her height (6' 4") and wingspan (7' 1") but also because she's just as effective under the basket as she is from the perimeter. And Jefferson is the Huskies' motor. She knows exactly how to find Stewart, pushing the tempo and daring defenders to keep up with her.

If Jefferson (left) were on any team other than Connecticut, Tuck says, "she's all anyone would talk about 24/7."

In her first two years at UConn, Jefferson was used primarily to cause havoc and create turnovers as a defender. Now, in addition to her team-high 88 steals, her 159 assists also lead the Huskies. She outraces opponents in the open floor on her way to layups and can stop and pop a shot if needed, shooting 58.1% from the field. (That percentage would rank eighth nationally, but players must hit five field goals per game to qualify; Jefferson makes 4.8.)

Huskies coach Geno Auriemma puts extra pressure on his upperclassmen, particularly his point guards. Veterans must accept responsibility for everything that happens on the court; he used to tell superstar Sue Bird that any turnovers were her fault, even if





BUCKET BRIGADE

Both Loyd (32), the player of the year front-runner, and Mitchell (25) have the scoring ability to carry their teams in the most difficult games.



she didn't touch the ball in the possession. Tuck says Jefferson embraces that pressure, playing her best basketball in the biggest games. During UConn's run to the 2014 title, Jefferson had 25 assists and 18 steals while committing just seven turnovers in six tournament games. Though she can get lost on a roster with five double-digit scorers, every one of the Huskies understands Jefferson's importance. "We don't play the same when she's not on the floor," Tuck says. "If Mo went to another school, she's all anyone would talk about 24/7."

At Notre Dame, all the talk is about the 5' 10" Loyd, who has scored in double figures in 75 of her last 76 games. Her play is all the more remarkable considering how much the

Irish lost to graduation last spring: All-Americans Kayla McBride and Natalie Achonwa took scoring pressure off Loyd. With defenses designed to stop her this season, Loyd has increased her point production (from 18.6 a game to 20.5) and become better at sharing the ball (102 assists, up from 79). Against teams ranked in the Top 25 this season, Loyd averaged 24.9 points. "Phenomenal," says Walz of the junior guard who scored 20 points and grabbed seven rebounds against Louisville on Feb. 23. "She has more responsibility this year and can still get a shot whenever she wants."

It helps that Loyd has the perfect running mate in sophomore Lindsay Allen. The pair has a near-telepathic connection in the open floor. Early in the second half against a feisty North Carolina team on Jan. 15, Loyd stole the ball from Tar Heels guard Danielle Butts and passed it to Allen, who then fed it right back to Loyd for a jumper. That basket put the Irish ahead 48-46, and they went on to win 89-79.

That's a move that another slick-shooting guard—Mitchell—can appreciate. The two-time SEC player of the year is often called a female version of Dwyane Wade. In addition to averaging 14.4 points, Mitchell also came up with a team-high 60 steals for the Gamecocks, who spent 12 weeks ranked at No. 1 this season and held opponents to just 52.6 points per game, eighth best in the country.

Mitchell grew up idolizing her coach, Dawn Staley, who played professionally until 2006. Earlier this month Mitchell was named a finalist for an award named in honor of her coach, which recognizes,

ALEX MENENDEZ/GETTY IMAGES (JEFFERSON); CHUCK BURTON/AP (LOYD); DAVID E. KLUTHO/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED (MITCHELL)



among other typical guard skills, the will to win—something she definitely shares with the ultracompetitive Staley.

South Carolina's offense works best when Mitchell gets in a rhythm early, but Staley has preached all season that the Gamecocks can't expect Mitchell to be Superwoman every night. If she struggles, South Carolina has a plethora of options down low with 6' 5" A'ja Wilson and 6' 4" Alaina Coates. Still, tough tournament games bring out the best of Mitchell's abilities. She poured in a team-high 17 points in a 62–46 victory over Tennessee on March 8 for the program's first SEC championship. And in a second-round NCAA tournament game against Oregon State in 2014, Mitchell scored all 20 of her points in the second half as the Gamecocks pulled away to earn their second trip to the Sweet 16 in three years.

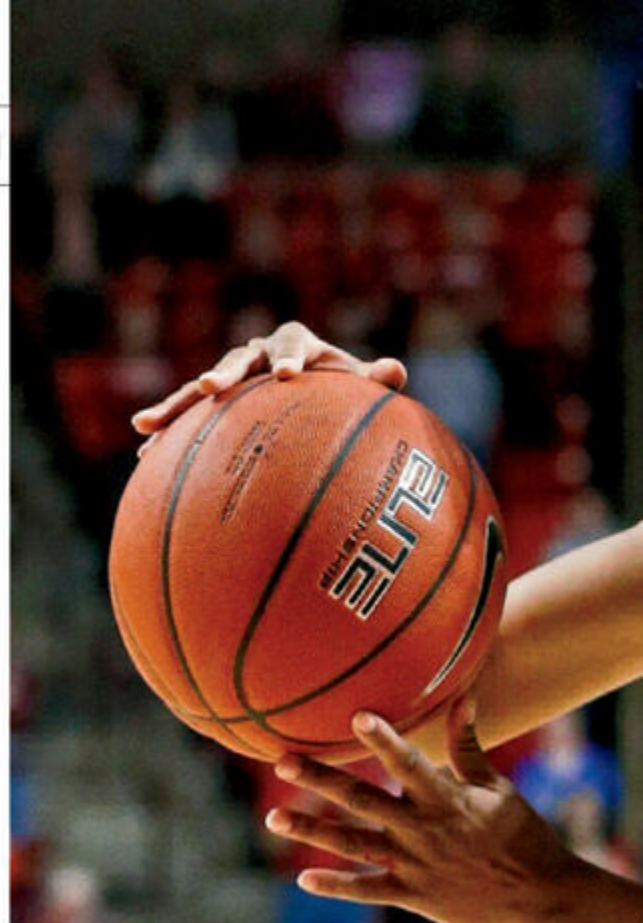
A TRIP TO Tampa is on Burdick's to-do list. Tennessee hasn't been to the Final Four since 2008, an eternity for a program that won eight titles under former coach Pat Summitt. Burdick, who can stretch the floor with her ability to shoot outside 15 feet and take defenders off the dribble, is well aware of the drought. She also knows almost everyone wrote off the Lady Vols after All-America candidate Izzy Harrison tore her right ACL on Feb. 15. Burdick now writes Harrison's number 20 on her hands and shoes before every game and welcomes the added pressure. "People are basically calling us scrubs without Izzy," Burdick says. "But you know what, it's fuel to the fire. Keep saying it." Before Harrison's injury Burdick was averaging 10.2 points



After the injury to Izzy Harrison, says Burdick (left), "people are calling us scrubs. But you know what, it's fuel to the fire."

and 6.8 rebounds; since then she's contributed 13.4 and 8.4. It's an impressive turnaround from her first five games of the season, in which she shot 12 for 47 from the field. She has also set career highs in steals (with four against Georgia on Feb. 26) and assists (seven, in the regular-season finale against Vanderbilt).

If Burdick's trying to learn how to prove doubters wrong, she could take notes from Baylor's Davis, whom Mulkey calls "the best kind of surprise." Certainly Davis has caught opponents off guard: It's not often that an unheralded freshman dominates UConn on



the boards, but Davis had 17 rebounds last season in a 66–55 loss to the Huskies.

"Most unique player I've ever coached," Mulkey says of Davis, who led Baylor to a fifth-consecutive Big 12 tournament championship with a 75–64 win over Texas on March 9. "She's got an ugly shot, but she's a scorer. She's undersized, but she tracks down offensive rebounds. You won't believe how good she is." Nothing about Davis's game is pretty, except for her 58.6 field goal percentage, which ranks sixth in the country. She isn't strong enough to outmuscle defenders, so she uses her tremendous body control to get into the paint and average 21.1 points. Davis crashes the boards too, snatching 8.4 rebounds per game, almost half of them offensive. She turns most of those into easy putbacks and doesn't waste many shots—against Oklahoma State in the Big 12 semifinals she had 29 points (on 12-for-17 shooting) in just 25 minutes.

It helps to have an elite distributor on your side: Junior point guard Niya Johnson hands out a nation-best 8.6 assists per game. Davis is one of her favorite targets, especially in transition, when she can beat most bigger post defenders down the floor. "She's just always around the basketball," Mulkey says. "You have to know where she is all the time."

That holds true for all of these players, who will be tracked by opponents as well as fans as the 2014 tournament marches toward Tampa. □



3 THREATS TO THE THREEPEAT

Don't plan the parade route through Storrs just yet. A trio of UConn's most familiar foes have the talent and the experience to prevent the Huskies from winning yet another championship

BY RICHARD DEITSCH



LET'S GET the obvious out of the way: If the Huskies play their A game at the Final Four—UConn has advanced to the national semifinals every year since 2008, and you can bet a case of Geno Auriemma's signature Pinot Grigio that the streak will continue—they will cruise to a 10th national title in Tampa. At 32-1 they are the most complete team in women's college basketball, leading the country in offense (89.7 points per game), scoring defense (47.7), field goal percentage (54.2) and field goal percentage defense (an absurdly low 30.1, or 3.2 better than second-place Princeton). They start three of the nation's 10 best players in junior forward Breanna

SOPH TOUCH

A crafty player, Baylor's Davis led the Big 12 in double doubles and worked her way onto the short list for player of the year.

Stewart, senior wing Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis and junior point guard Moriah Jefferson. No less than the Kentucky men, Connecticut is the prohibitive favorite. But these three teams

have the best mix of talent to be able to topple Connecticut, and not one of them are ready to cede the title just yet. (The brackets, which are on SI.com, were announced after SI went to press.)

• **NOTRE DAME (31-2):** The Irish have the best template to deny UConn back-to-back-to-back titles. First, no program is more familiar with the Huskies: The two teams have met 14 times over the past five seasons (including UConn's 76-58 win on Dec. 6 in South Bend), and each has won seven times. Second, the Irish can score: They are the second-best shooting team in the country, at 49.8%, and the fourth-highest scoring (81.2 points per game). In addition to spectacular junior guard Jewell Loyd, Notre Dame will have 6' 3" forward Brianna Turner, the ACC's freshman of the year, who missed the game against the Huskies because of a separated right shoulder. And finally, the Irish have players with high basketball IQs and a savvy coach in Muffet McGraw. In UConn's lone defeat this season—an 88-86 overtime loss at Stanford on Nov. 17—the Cardinal executed a cunning game plan in which they doubled Stewart each time she touched the ball. "We studied what moves they like to do," says Stanford's Tara VanDerveer, who is also the only coach to have beaten Auriemma since Notre Dame did so 80 games ago. "You need a team that absorbs a scouting report very well."

• **SOUTH CAROLINA (30-2):** Though the Gamecocks lost 87-62 at UConn on Feb. 9, they held a three-point lead 7½ minutes in before the Huskies took over. Attacking in transition is one way to beat UConn, and South Carolina has the ideal attacking point guard in junior All-America Tiffany Mitchell. A deep frontcourt made up of 6' 5" freshman forward A'ja Wilson, 6' 4" sophomore center Alaina Coates and 6-foot senior forward Aleighsa Welch can also be counted on for buckets in the half-court.

• **BAYLOR (30-3):** The Bears are balanced: They are fourth in the nation in shooting (48.1%) and ninth in field goal percentage defense (34.7). They have a Hall of Fame coach in Kim Mulkey, the most efficient scorer in the country in 5' 11" sophomore forward Nina Davis and a point guard in junior Niya Johnson who leads the nation in assists (8.6 per game)—not to mention a championship pedigree.





You're In Good Hands With **SAMMIE COATES**

The NFL's free-agency extravaganza has largely wound down, and all eyes are turning to the April draft. For receiver-needy teams looking to catch on quickly—or anyone else who needs a little help—the former Auburn wideout has so much to offer

BY ANDY STAPLES

Photograph by
Todd Rosenberg
For Sports Illustrated

→ **SAMMIE COATES** has an idea. At some point, with a chunk of the NFL money he is bound to make because he is fast (a 4.43-second 40 at the combine), explosive (41-inch vertical jump), strong enough to toss a jamming cornerback onto the sideline (23 bench-press reps at 225 pounds, best among receivers) and proficient enough at catching footballs, Coates wants to start an organization. He wants to reach into communities like Leroy, Ala., the no-stoplight dot-on-a-map where he spent his formative years, and he wants to help kids who've lost a parent. The former Auburn receiver lost his father in November 2003, when Sammie was 10 and in fifth grade. Sammie Coates Sr. was killed in a car crash while driving to one of his two jobs, but his son also understands that some parents disappear without leaving this mortal coil. He wants to help those kids as well.

Foremost, Coates, 21, wants to tell kids, It's going to be O.K. He wants them to know that they can do great things. After his father died, he didn't have anyone to offer such assurance. He wants those lost souls to know that they can build their own lives, piece by piece. They need only follow his advice.

1. FIND A FRIEND; MAKE HIM A BROTHER

When Sammie, along with his mother and his two older brothers, made the six-mile move from Jackson, Ala., to Leroy, he wasn't looking to grow his inner circle. "I just wanted to be by myself," he says. On the first day of sixth grade he and Andrew Williams nearly brawled. Andrew owned the playground; his teams won every game of basketball, football, stickball. And in Sammie he sensed a threat. "I didn't like the competition," Williams says. "You want to be the dominant male." A territorial struggle seemed inevitable.

Instead, before the boys raised their fists, they realized that their similarities could provide the foundation of a friendship. Soon they were inseparable.

Williams told this story as Coates caught passes in Auburn's indoor practice facility in preparation for the April 30 NFL draft. One day later, Bill Belichick and the Patriots' director of player personnel, Nick Caserio, put the Tigers' skill players through a 10-route workout that seemed designed specifically to test Coates, who—if they're lucky—might be available when the defending Super Bowl champions make the last pick of the first round. (In a strong receivers crop, most mock drafts have at least Kevin White, Amari Cooper and DeVante

SAMMIE COATES

Parker going ahead of Coates.) The fact is, though: If not for Williams, Coates might not have been at Auburn, at that workout. Belichick might not even know his name.

Hours before dawn on the morning of July 17, 2010, when both boys were in high school, Williams came looking for his friend. Auburn was holding its final recruiting camp of the summer, and Williams, a Leroy High running back, wanted one last chance to impress the coaches. Coates was supposed to be his ride.

Sammie didn't answer the door. In order to get an offer from Auburn, he'd have to impress at the camp. But he'd already won over the coaches at Southern Miss and softly committed; that would be fine. Plus, he didn't feel like driving the 3½ hours.

Refusing to allow his slumbering friend to dash his dreams, Williams ran around the side of the house, climbed through Coates's bedroom window and shook his friend awake. "He basically dragged me out," says Coates, who scraped the Crimson Tide stickers off the window of his black Nissan Sentra before hitting the road.

At camp, Coates faced off in one drill against cornerback Loucheiz Purifoy, who would go on to start at Florida and play 11 games with the Colts last year after leaving school early. In their first meeting, Purifoy jammed Coates at the line, scuttling his route before it even started, and the receiver retreated back to the queue. There Coates moved to ensure that he'd face Purifoy again—and this time he burned the four-star recruit. After a few more reps with similar results, Auburn's receivers coach, Trooper Taylor, had seen enough. Coates met afterward with coach Gene Chizik, and a scholarship was immediately offered and accepted.

Imagine: Had Williams relented, had Coates settled for Southern Miss, Sammie might have gone off a cliff with the Golden Eagles after coach Larry Fedora left for North Carolina in 2012. Instead, he played for a national title and grew into one of the SEC's best field-stretchers. Williams didn't win a scholarship at that camp, but in '13 he transferred to Auburn from Miles College, walking on to the team thanks to a good word from his friend. Now Coates is headed to the NFL and Williams is pursuing a career as a college strength coach, but they remain a team. Says Coates, "We built a friendship that will never be broken."

2. BE RESOURCEFUL, BE RESPONSIBLE

Some athletes gloat about their hunger. Not Coates; he remembers *real* hunger. There were enough financial rough patches after his father's death that a growling stomach can still bring a flood of unwanted memories. "You never want to feel it again," he says.

Dragged out of bed by his best friend, **Coates scraped the Crimson Tide stickers off the window of his car** and hit the road. He earned a scholarship from Auburn later that day.

GETTIN' HANDSY

Some scouts doubt Coates's ability to see ball to palm. He lost this deep one against Louisiana Tech, but many others didn't get away.

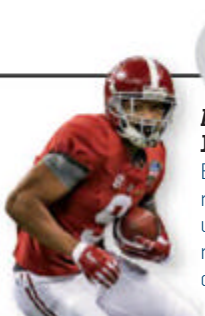
He found ways to survive. In Leroy, he observed that some girls rarely finished their lunches at school, and often one would give him a loaded tray that might get him through the day. Other times he would eat at a friend's house; or Williams, who worked at a restaurant in Jackson, would hook his pal up. The same kind of scrounging carried on through college—until 2014, when the NCAA began allowing schools to provide unlimited food for their athletes. Then Coates's budgetary woes vanished as if by magic. (Before that, his scholarship checks all went toward bills.)

In December, after only 3½ years on campus (he left Auburn as a redshirt junior), Coates procured a document that he believes will ensure that he never hears that growl again: a bachelor's degree in public administration. For a kid who once needed Leroy



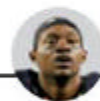
Training Comp

Coates is hardly the only draft prospect with NFL-caliber receiver skills. SI.com's **Chris Burke** offers best-case-scenario equivalents for the top players in a deep wideout class.



Amari Cooper, Ala.
Jordy Nelson, GB

Both win with crisp route-running and underrated speed, not necessarily by dominating in the air.



DeVante Parker, Louis.
Alshon Jeffery, CHI

Throw it near Parker and he, like Jeffery, will go up and get it. Can Parker become an all-around WR too?



High's basketball coach to wake him in order to get his butt to school, this was a towering achievement. If football doesn't work out in the long run, Coates wants to be "a Fed"—maybe with the FBI, maybe the Secret Service. But not until after he gets his master's degree, which he hopes to procure while playing in the NFL. "You don't want your future family to struggle like you did," he says. "I don't want my kid to be like I was. I want him to have better."

3. LET THE NEGATIVE STUFF SLIDE

Because agents weren't allowed inside, Michael Perrett had to watch his client's Auburn pro day from a sports bar, where he got updates texted by friends inside the football complex. Did Coates catch every ball? (No; nine of 10.) Was that incompletion Coates's fault? (Arguably; the ball was a little behind him and a tad low, but it hit him in the hands. Coates might have compensated later when he floated along the sideline to snag a deep out.) This information was critical to Perrett because the main criticism of his client was his 2014 drop rate, which NFL.com reported as 19.1%.

Coates also dropped a deep ball during the February combine. Everywhere he goes, he gets asked about his hands. Is he a natural pass catcher? Does he catch with his hands or trap the ball with his body? "I just think it's funny," he says. "You know how you hear something funny and it always keeps you laughing?"

In his defense, Coates might point out that he averaged 21.8 yards per reception, fourth best in the nation, on an offense that ran the ball 65% of the time in 2014. He might also mention that in November he caught five passes for 206 yards and two touchdowns with two injured knees against No. 2 Alabama. Coates won't say it, but those passes were thrown by a quarterback, Nick Marshall, who many project as a cornerback in the NFL. It's a safe bet that Coates will see more catchable balls on his next team.

4. FORGIVE

Coates doesn't remember exactly when, but he knows it was in 2012, the night before a game, that Auburn's chaplain delivered a stirring sermon about forgiveness, and afterward Coates just had to call his mother. "He said he was holding on to some stuff that he needed to let go," Sharon Coates says. "If he didn't, it would hinder where he wanted to go."

Sammie had grown distant from Sharon during his high school years as they continued to struggle with Sammie Sr.'s death. Rather than talk it out, the youngest of Sharon's four children retreated to his room, and the silence wedged them apart. But after that sermon, Sammie needed



Kevin White, WVU
Julio Jones, ATL

White's 4.35 40 at the combine solidified his status as a home run threat, just as Jones has been in the NFL.



Dorial Green-Beckham, Mizzou
Brandon Marshall, NYJ

Similarities in their dominant traits on the field *and* lingering questions off it.



Sammie Coates, Aub.
Torrey Smith, SF

Smith has made a living tracking the deep ball. Coates can take the top off a secondary too.





to get close again. “She’s hurt like I’ve hurt,” he says. “She lost the same person.”

Sammie told Sharon that he loved her. She told him that she’d tried her best, but she hadn’t known how to replace what Sammie lost when his father died.

After that call, the relationship healed. Sharon came to more Auburn games and called regularly to tell her son that she was proud of him. She was most proud in December. “I wish his father could have been there to see him graduate,” she says.

5. FIND INSPIRATION

On Sept. 14, 2013, 11-year-old Kenzie Ray sat outside gate 10 at Jordan-Hare Stadium following Auburn’s 24–20 win over Mississippi State and waited to meet Tigers offensive tackle Shon Coleman. Kenzie, from nearby Tallahassee, had been diagnosed with leukemia the previous May, and she wanted to talk to the player who, famously, had defeated cancer and come back to play. She met Coleman—but she also met Coates, who traded wristbands with her and sent her a shout-out on Instagram.

Before long Kenzie and Sammie were speaking nearly every day, on the phone or over FaceTime, and today Coates calls her his sister; she calls him her brother. The night before Coates worked out at the combine in Indianapolis, Keisha Ray watched her daughter bawl as she FaceTimed with the receiver. He had been busy training for the combine in Gulf Breeze, Fla., so he hadn’t visited Kenzie in weeks. Kenzie, sick and weakened by a dose of chemotherapy, finally smiled the next

“I know he doesn’t fully get it, because he’s a kid himself,” Keisha says of Coates, **“but when he lays eyes on his firstborn, he’ll understand what he has done for our family.”**

day when she saw Coates wearing cleats with her name imprinted on them as he blazed through the 40-yard dash, recording the 12th-fastest time among offensive players.

Kenzie helps Coates maintain some perspective. “This little girl has more faith than I do,” he says. And Coates helps Kenzie feel normal—Keisha noticed this early in their friendship. “He would get down to her level, like a kid again,” she says. “[Kenzie] needed that.”

Last summer, when Kenzie contracted pneumonia and doctors said she might never leave her Birming-

ham hospital, Coates supported her entire family with his visits and calls. If Kenzie wouldn’t answer, he would blow up Keisha’s phone, worried that something had happened. When he could sense Keisha’s stress, he relayed one message over and over: It’s going to be O.K. “I know he doesn’t fully get it, because he’s a kid himself and not a parent,” says Keisha, “but when he lays eyes on his firstborn, he’ll understand what he has done for our family.”

HELP ON WHEELS

Coates has stood by Kenzie through her fight, including at the Maxwell Awards last week, where he was commended for his kindness.

Coates already understands what Kenzie has done for him. When he visited her in the hospital and saw cancer-stricken children building friendships—even when their conditions sometimes prevented them from entering each other’s rooms—he understood that the strongest people find hope and joy no matter their circumstances. “They make the best of their lives,” Coates says. “Why should I be down just because I have a freakin’ pulled hamstring?”

If Coates can explain all of these things to kids who feel lost like he once did, he’ll be happy. He wants them to make friends, to use their minds, to forget, forgive, find inspiration. That way, no one will have to shake them awake; they’ll embrace each morning the way he does now. “Holy crap,” he says. “It’s a new day, I’ve got air to breathe. I know there’s something out there I can do to be a better person.” □



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"I remember this woman saying to me, 'your mother's dead.' That's why you're here with us." Two years after that my mother and her

PATTY MILLS, BALA

"...there were happy to get us kids. We had to stay with wonderful old ladies that looked after us."

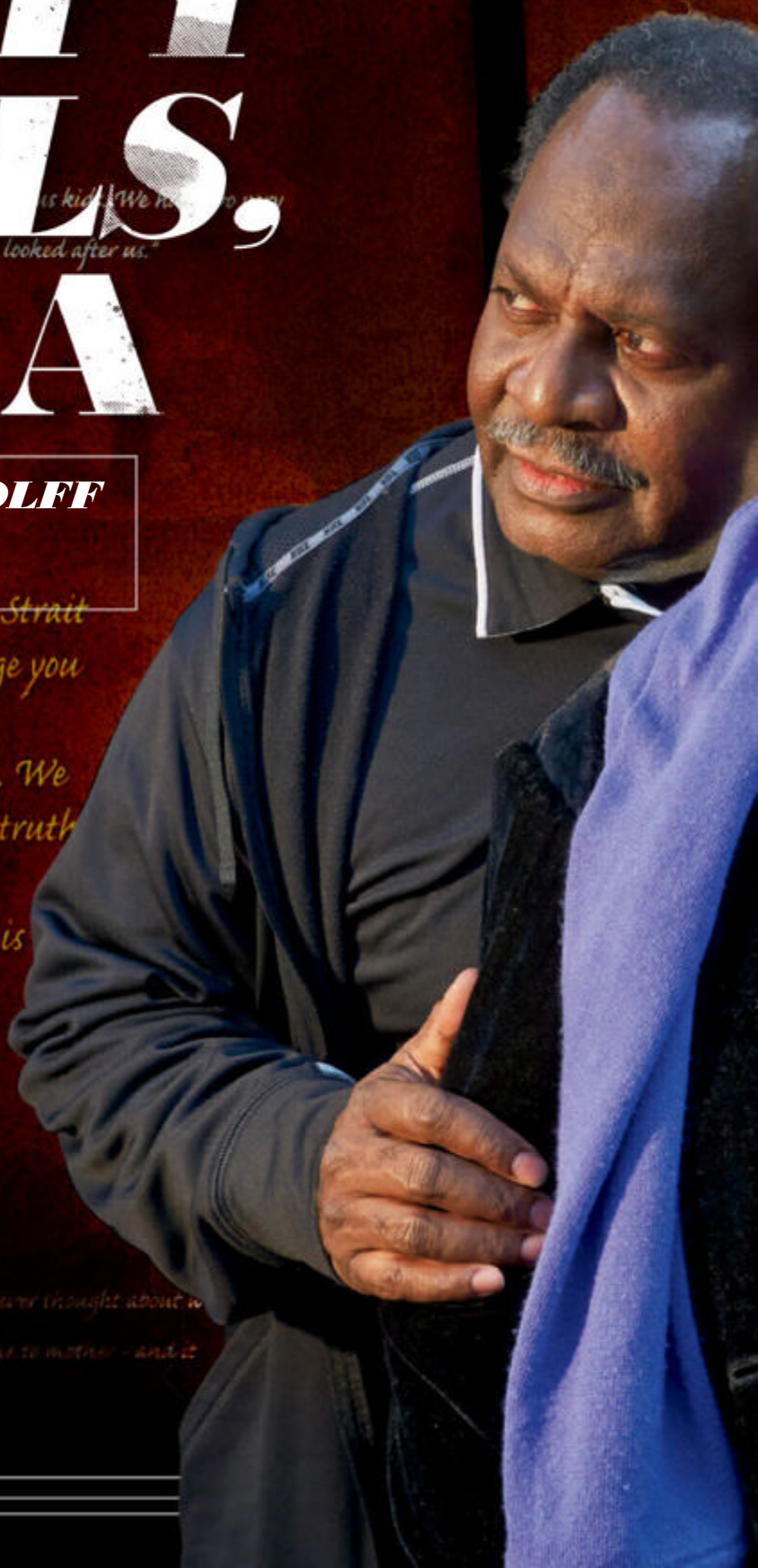
BY ALEXANDER WOLFF

**PHOTOGRAPH
BY DAVID CALLOW
FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED**

★

There is no more
diverse roster
in the NBA than
that of the Spurs,
populated by
balas, or brothers,
from eight
countries, each
with a story to
share, none richer
than the one
their Indigenous
Australian point
guard tells,
with feeling

*"To me, they were children, that's that. I never thought about it
colour their skin was... they were there for me to mother - and it
had to be mothering, not just caring."*



"The nuns and fathers at Beagle Bay were good to us. We learnt at school there, we worked in the gardens and there was plenty of food. But my mother's heart was broken, and soon after she was admitted to the Beagle Bay Mental Hospital where she died."

**THE
WRITING
ON THE
WALL**

Benny, Yvonne and Patty Mills are descended from Torres Strait and Aboriginal natives whose forebears lived Down Under long before Europeans.

*"Dormitory
out of it was."*





THE SPURS would soon turn their attention to the Heat, their opponent in the NBA Finals, which were set to begin two days later. They would go over the importance of clogging the middle against LeBron James, of scrambling over the tops of screens set for Ray Allen, of keeping Chris Bosh from facing up on the block. But last June 3, as the Spurs gathered in the video room at their practice facility, an entirely different item topped coach Gregg Popovich's agenda.

"Anybody know what today is?" Popovich asked.

Patty Mills knew, but the Australian point guard couldn't bring himself to speak—not after the portrait of a black man in his 40s, with a beard and freckles, flashed up on the screen. The intimacy of the photograph, Mills's familiarity with the man and his story, and the unexpectedness of what was unfolding before him combined to "make my hair stand on end," Mills says. "It wasn't just any practice or meeting. It was to prepare for the NBA Finals and the Miami Heat. We're all geared up, and that's the first thing he says."

It was left to a fellow Aussie, center Aron Baynes, to answer, "It's Mabo Day." And with that, Popovich launched into the story of Australia's Martin Luther King Jr.

Eddie Koiki Mabo grew up in the Torres Strait, which separates Australia's Cape York Peninsula from Papua New Guinea. Well into the 20th century, inhabitants of the strait's scatter of islands, which are considered Australian territory, had to endure the indignities of segregation, government control over their movements, and wages paid in credit rather than cash for food and housing. When Mabo learned that Australian law didn't recognize his right to inherit land that had been passed down through generations of his family, he became the lead plaintiff in a legal challenge to the doctrine of *Terra nullius*, which held that Australia had been unoccupied before white Europeans began to settle the continent in 1788. The case took a decade to wend its way through the legal system. But on June 3, 1992, five months after Mabo died at 55 in the arms of his wife, Bonita, and exactly 22 years before the Spurs met in that video room, the High Court of Australia ruled 6 to 1 in Mabo's favor, enshrining the concept of "native title" in Australian law. The preexisting legal regime, one justice wrote, "made the indigenous inhabitants intruders in their own homes."

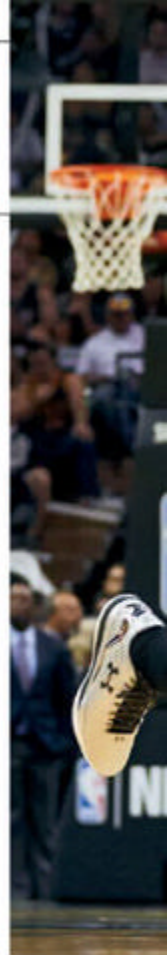
Mills pulled himself together enough to add a few comments about the Mabo decision at Popovich's invitation. "You could see that he was pretty moved by it all," the coach says.

On a team with more international players than domestic ones, Mills's background is easily the most exotic, for he carries the blood of both of Australia's indigenous peoples. His father, Benny Mills, grew up in the Torres Strait, where for centuries people of Melanesian descent, who made a living fishing, gardening and diving for pearl shell, intermixed with the Japanese, Filipinos, Indonesians, Malays and South Sea Islanders who plied the region's trade routes. Patty's mother, Yvonne, is the product of a liaison between a white man and an Aboriginal woman. She belongs to Australia's so-called Stolen Generations: tens of thousands of mixed-race children, known pejoratively as "half-castes," who were taken from their mothers and placed in group homes and missions from the late 1800s to the 1970s in a social-engineering project sanctioned by both the Australian government and various churches. Although some of the children were rescued from abusive circumstances and placed in foster care with white families, historians say the project was part of an effort to "smooth the pillow of a dying race," as the early-20th-century Irish-Australian welfare worker Daisy Bates described it—to socialize the children as white in hopes of breeding their indigeness away.

As pep talks go, Popovich's Mabo Day remarks were a tour de force. The coach often devotes a portion of team meetings to the culture or history of some member of the NBA's most nationally diverse outfit. "Nine of our 15 are from elsewhere, and I'm always looking for ways to make them part of the story," Popovich says. And while he is reluctant to draw a straight line from the

Spurs' recognition of Mabo Day to the star turn Mills would take in those Finals, he believes that knowing one another's stories off the court binds the Spurs on the court. "It builds camaraderie and helps them grow as people, and all that carries over," Popovich says. "They feel connected and engaged and do better work."

Carrying the mantle of Mabo over the ensuing fortnight, Mills made a name for himself. As a substitute for starter Tony Parker, he grabbed the decisive Game 5 by the scruff in the third quarter, scoring 14 points in five minutes



JOHN W. MC DONOUGH/SPORTS ILLUSTRATED



POPOVICH BELIEVES THAT KNOWING ONE ANOTHER'S STORIES OFF THE COURT BINDS THE SPURS ON THE COURT: "IT BREEDS CAMARADERIE AND HELPS THEM GROW AS PEOPLE."

on four three-pointers and a reverse layup past James. As San Antonio made short work of Miami, ABC's Jeff Van Gundy and Mark Jackson needed something else to talk about, and when they spoke on air of Eddie Mabo and the Torres Strait, it all seemed to be part of Mills's master plan to use his gift for the game to spread the culture and tradition of his people. "You represent your family, mum and dad, your school and your culture," he told an auditorium of boys in blue blazers last September during a visit to Marist, the Canberra day school he attended for five years. "Now that I get a chance on the big stage, it's even more important to remember where I came from."

The ancestry that makes the 26-year-old Mills a role model for First Australians helped turn him into a basketball player. As adults, his parents separately found their way to Canberra, the capital, to work in indigenous affairs for the federal government. There they met and married, and together they

★ **FLOOR LEADER**

Pushed by Pop (far left) to shed weight and cut down on mistakes, Mills (8) emerged in the '14 Finals as far more than a towel waver.

founded and ran a basketball club for indigenous boys and girls, the Shadows, for which their only child began to play at age four. In the moments after the Spurs won the 2014 title, Benny Mills handed his son two flags, which Patty's girlfriend, Alyssa Levesque, had

borrowed from an Aussie pub in San Antonio. Patty passed one, the familiar Southern Cross of Australia, to Baynes. Around his own shoulders he draped the Torres Strait Islander flag, with its bars of green (for the islands) and blue (for the sea), its white five-pointed star (for the five island clusters and the islanders' tradition of celestial navigation) and its white *dhari*, or traditional headdress of crane feathers (for the people).

The walls of the locker room in the Spurs' arena, the AT&T Center, are festooned with the same Popovich-chosen motivational saying, posted in every language represented on the roster, including Meriam Mir, which is spoken in the eastern Torres Strait. "I wasn't interested in 'There is no *I* in *team*' or any of that crap," the coach says. Instead the words are from Jacob Riis, the 19th-century Danish immigrant to the U.S. who became a social reformer and championed the stranger in a strange land: *When nothing seems to help, I go back and look at a stonecutter hammering away at his rock perhaps a hundred times without as much as a crack showing in it. Yet at the hundred and first blow it will split in two, and I know it was not that blow that did it—but all that had gone before.* Ordinarily the Spurs outsource the Riis translations to linguists at San Antonio's Trinity University, but Meriam Mir is so obscure that Mills's relatives had to be enlisted to help.

Indigenous Australians have a hard-won understanding of the sentiment at the heart of that quote. But there's a saying in the Torres Strait that echoes the words of Riis. It speaks both to the Spurs' philosophy as an organization and to the mentality that Mills has taken with him to the NBA: *Your past must connect with your present to create your future.*

EDDIE MABO was Patty Mills's great-uncle—Benny Mills's uncle on his mother's side. Elders on Murray Island disapproved of a romance Eddie had as a 16-year-old and, in 1952, exiled him to the mainland, where he worked the wharves, railroads and cane fields of Queensland. In the port city of Townsville, he founded the Black Community School to pass along the music, dance and folkways of the Torres Strait to children of islander descent. Then, as a gardener at James Cook University in the '70s, he befriended two professors who mentioned over lunch one day that the state considered his father's plot back on Murray Island to be "Crown land."

Hearing this, Mabo vowed to learn all he could about relevant



Australian law. At a land rights conference in Townsville in August 1981, attorneys and activists joined Mabo to plan a test case. Benny Mills, who had been sent to the mainland himself following 10th grade after exhausting the schooling available on the islands, sat in the room that day. “We’re all like, Go for it,” he recalls. “We all know it’s your land, even if the state denies it.”

To help make its case, Mabo’s legal team introduced testimony about Malo’s Law, the code by which people in the eastern Torres Strait had abided for centuries: The god Malo came to Murray Island in the form of an octopus. With his tentacles he induced the island’s eight clans to work together and, as one tenet of Malo’s Law enjoined them, *tag mauki mauki, teter mauki mauki*, roughly “keep your hands and feet off the land of others.” Patty wears number 8 because it was the number of his uncle Sam Mills, the first person to leave the Torres Strait to train as a basketball player at the Australian Institute of Sport in Canberra. But it is also the number of an octopus’s tentacles. “Maybe,” Patty says of his uncle, “he chose it for that reason.”

Even before she met Benny Mills, Yvonne Haynes knew his uncle Eddie. She and he had worked together on a national committee on indigenous education. Her own commitment to the cause of First Australians had grown out of a family story that evokes the 2002 film about the Stolen Generations, *Rabbit-Proof Fence*.

Yvonne was born in South Australia to Gladys Haynes, a member of the Ynunga Aboriginal tribe who had grown up at Koonibba Mission, a Lutheran children’s home for Aboriginal children. There Gladys was taught to cook, clean and sew, and at 12 she was sent to work as a domestic with a white family. Authorities gave her an “exemption certificate”; without it, she would have been prohibited by the Aboriginal Protection Act from living among white people. But it was a devil’s bargain, for the certificate came on the condition that she forswear her heritage and not associate with other Aborigines. “Because my mother had the certificate, by law she was white,” says Yvonne Mills. “But she looked Aboriginal, so she was treated that way.” The certificate, which many Aborigines derisively called a “dog tag,” also made her ineligible for support from the Aboriginal Protection Board, which might have helped her find housing. When welfare officials took her children away, they cited her inability to house them to the state’s satisfaction.

Yvonne can’t recall being separated from her mother because she was barely two when it happened. But older siblings have recounted that day in 1949: five of them locked in a room, from which they were taken one-by-one to be placed in group homes. For years afterward, if they asked after their mother, they were told that she didn’t want them. Only in the late ’90s, thanks to a government inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal children, did Yvonne and her siblings find Gladys Haynes’s entreaties to the authorities: letters reading, *Please give me my children back* and *A promise is a promise*. “We knew what had happened to us, but reading the records we learned



FOR A U.S. COUNTERPART, YOU’D NEED TO FIND THE SON OF A FATHER WHO MARCHED IN SELMA AND A MOTHER WHOSE CHEROKEE FAMILY WALKED THE TRAIL OF TEARS.

what happened to her,” Yvonne says. “How she tried to get us back and they kept shifting the goalposts: ‘Get a house.’ ‘So many rooms.’ There was also mention of her color, ‘her dark appearance.’ You could read between the lines.”

Yvonne had supervised visits with Gladys, but she didn’t see her mother again in public until age 17, when welfare officials gave her permission to attend the wedding of her sister Beverley. By then Yvonne had been put in foster care with a white couple. Her foster father worked for the railroad, which transferred him often, and at each stop Yvonne encountered new schoolchildren to call her *darky* or *n-----*. Welfare officers who looked in on her administered regular humiliations, such as giving her an intelligence test because she was shy and quiet—only to conclude, when she proved to be perfectly smart, that she suffered from an inferiority complex. “It wasn’t only the stigma you’d get for having an Aboriginal background, but what you had to go through as a ward of the state,” Yvonne says. “People say, ‘Get over it.’ But there are still deep wounds.”

After completing her schooling, Yvonne tried to become a

hairdresser, knocking on salon doors in Adelaide to no avail. But Beverley's wedding had provided a breakthrough. "My sister and I had been brought up by different people, but the mannerisms, the way she talked—it was me," Yvonne says. "I found my family and really began to find my identity." Embracing her heritage, she took that posting to Canberra in indigenous affairs. Meanwhile, the results of the government inquiry affirmed her on another level: "My experience was true, because it happened to lots of others too."

Last summer Patty visited his grandmother's grave for the first time. Gladys Haynes, who died at age 60 in 1979, now rests a short drive from the Koonibba Mission where she spent her childhood. Because she was forcibly separated from her Aboriginal roots, her grandson will always be more conversant with the culture of his father's people. "I grabbed my dad's side by the horns," he says. "I understand only parts of my mum's culture, what with mum not being fluent in her own language because of what happened."

He's nonetheless acutely aware of representing both categories of First Australians. For an American counterpart, you'd need to find the son of a father who marched in Selma and a mother whose Cherokee family walked the Trail of Tears. "He takes a lot of pride in being the first Indigenous Australian to win an NBA championship," says Baynes. "But he's just as proud if not more so to be able to do it for [all] indigenous people."

THE ODDS of becoming an NBA champion are long, almost impossibly so if you're 6 feet tall with a grandfather who was a pearl diver in the Torres Strait and a grandmother who was raised in a mission home out in the bush. Yet when Patty was two, that grandfather, Sam Mills, put up a basketball hoop outside his home on Thursday Island so Patty could shoot hoops on visits to the Strait. Back in Canberra, where Yvonne and Benny found a place for their little boy with an indigenous dance troupe and tucked him into bed to tapes of island songs, the Shadows further forged his

TROPHY ★ TOUR

Mills took the Larry O'Brien to Thursday Island (opposite) and celebrated with many of his innumerable fans in the Torres Strait (below).



identity. Playing in tournaments around Australia, the team encountered the occasional racist taunt, but the Millses insulated Patty and his teammates from the worst of it. "My main focus was to empower them," Benny says, "so that anything they'd face they could manage."

After dalliances with rugby and Aussie Rules football, Patty settled on basketball, enrolling at the Australian Institute of Sport at 15. Three years later he became the youngest player ever to attend the training camp of the Boomers, Australia's senior national men's team, and the following fall he headed to Moraga, Calif., to play for St. Mary's. It was there that Mills began to notice a pattern. "I appear African-American," he says, "so it's not until I start talking that people go, 'Hold on, there's something not right here.' But it's an awesome conversation starter. I open my mouth, they get curious, and I say, 'Got a few minutes? Have a seat.' There's a part of me that's very stereotypically Australian, with the lingo, or for lack of a better way of putting it, the way white Australians would speak. And then, Oh, that's not all I am. . . ." Last season Popovich pointedly asked Mills if he considered himself black. Mills and his girlfriend could only laugh later the same day when, filling out a form at the DMV, he had a chance to check a box marked BLACK. He chose not to. "He knows who he is," Levesque says. "He knows his heritage. It's a matter of getting other people educated about it."

After Mills's second season in the Gaels' backcourt, the Trail Blazers chose him with the 55th pick of the 2009 draft. In Portland he became the guy on the bench who would accessorize teammates' three-pointers with a goofy gesture called "3 goggles." But the lockout stunted his development with the Blazers, and in March 2012, shortly after the end of the work stoppage, he signed with the Spurs.

In San Antonio, Mills quickly won over teammates by turning towel waving into performance art and hooking up his guitar to the P.A. system on the team charter to serenade them with songs such as Sam Cooke's "Cupid." But he wasn't really contributing on the floor. "In the playoffs you have to trust a guy completely," says Popovich, who used Mills for only 14 minutes during the 2013 Finals. "That first year he was a little bit of a wild card. He'd make turnovers at critical times. We needed to inject him with a little more point guard savvy rather than that two guard 'I'm gonna let it fly' mentality."

Mills sat down at the end of the season and, he says, "had a good think." He made himself over physically, adopting a variation on the paleo diet and halving his body fat to below 7%. "He'd been a little bit of a chub," says Popovich, who noticed that the extra pounds impaired Mills's ability to defend. "As soon as he came to camp we noticed he was quicker, faster."

The payoff was immediate. According to numbers run by SportVU, Mills covered more distance per 48 minutes last season than any other player in the league. His newfound fitness showed particularly in the effectiveness of his pull-up



jumper in transition. The PUJIT is among the most difficult shots to sink consistently, yet when it drops, it can be a tire iron upside an opponent's head. A year ago Mills made 48% of his PUJITs, a rate far greater than that of anyone else in the league who launched them as often. Given Mills's fitness and court coverage, no one begrudges him his PUJITs. "You earn the right to take those," says teammate Boris Diaw, a forward from France, "if you're impeccable on D."

With last June's title, Mills went from the guy waving a towel to the one waving a flag. Over the summer the Spurs re-signed him for three years even though he had been diagnosed with a torn rotator cuff during his exit physical. It turned out he had been laying out for all those loose balls with a bum right shoulder.

The Spurs knew he would miss the first two months of this season recovering from surgery, but of the decision to commit \$12 million to keep an injured free agent, Popovich says, "It wasn't even a question. Obviously he can shoot the basketball and has a lot of energy. But he's beloved on this team for his enthusiasm, his kindness, his understated gravitas. As long as I'm here, he's going to be here. Unless we can't afford him."

With additional injuries this season to Parker, Finals MVP Kawhi Leonard and Brazilian center Tiago Splitter, all starters, the defending champions are only just rounding into form, having won seven of their previous eight games through Sunday. "I want the ball to move like it did last year in the playoffs, and I haven't seen that yet," Popovich says. "We've had guys who've been out coming back, pressing a little bit and wanting it too much, instead of trusting each other and the system."

The coach's diagnosis comes before a home game against Sacramento, the first after the Spurs' annual three-week exile while the rodeo comes through town. The Kings, playing for their third coach of the season, don't have the stability to match the San Antonio Stonecutters, who know that, eventually, they'll strike that 101st blow. And so the game unspools: The Spurs stand a point down after a quarter, go up double digits by halftime and wind up 27-point victors. The win features flashes of last spring's ball rotation and touch passing, and Mills operates smoothly in his accustomed role as Parker's backup. "He's just beginning," Popovich says, "to feel his oats again."

CLOSE TO ★ HOME

Mills wore Aussie green and gold at the '08 (below) and '12 Olympics, and last fall he visited his old school in Canberra to share what he's learned as a pro (right).



As always, the Spurs use their awareness of one another's stories as they ramp up for the playoffs. On Mills's recommendation, Manu Ginóbili, the swingman from Argentina, has seen *Rabbit-Proof Fence* and spoken with Yvonne Mills during her visits to San Antonio. Patty has shared with Ginóbili, Diaw and Splitter video of himself doing island dances and explained the choreographed narratives of island life and legends. "We always say, Someday we'll meet on Thursday Island," says Ginóbili, who's among the Spurs who call one another *bala*, the Torres Strait honorific for *brother*.

"We talk a lot about what we want to do after our careers are over," Diaw says. "With Patty, it always comes back to his heritage. One thing he wants to do is help make Mabo Day a national holiday in Australia."

THREE YEARS after the High Court's ruling, only hours after Eddie Mabo's family sanctified his life with a traditional tombstone unveiling at his grave site in Queensland, vandals defiled the headstone with swastikas and racial slurs. Relatives hastily had the body exhumed and moved to Murray Island, to be reburied on the land for which Mabo had fought. But the incident underscores how, even with the signatures of more than one million white citizens in "Sorry Books" since the late 1990s, and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's formal apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, Australia's journey to reconciliation remains fitful.

Aussies make a fetish of sportsmanship, calling their country the Land of the Fair Go. But racism has a long track record in Australian sport, extending to the recent past. Before Aboriginal high jumper Percy Hobson won a gold medal at the 1962 Commonwealth Games, in Perth, Australian track and field officials told him to keep quiet about his "background." Frank Reys, the only Aboriginal jockey to win the Melbourne Cup, in '73, stressed his father's Filipino heritage to smooth his acceptance in horse racing. In '93, Aussie Rules football star Nicky Winmar, fed up with racist chants at the stadium in Collingwood, a suburb of Melbourne, faced the crowd, lifted his shirt and pointed proudly at his skin. The gesture, captured in a photograph by a Melbourne newspaper, finally began to roll back the abuse that had been tolerated in the sport for years.

At the 2000 Olympics, in Sydney, Patty Mills, then 12, watched TV mesmerized as Aboriginal sprinter Cathy Freeman lit the cauldron and then, during her victory lap after winning the 400 meters, carried both the Southern Cross and the Aboriginal flag. Many members of the foreign press described those moments as evidence of a new Australia, at peace with its past. In fact, in a poll of 718 Australians taken





“HE’S BELOVED ON THE TEAM FOR HIS ENTHUSIASM, HIS KINDNESS, HIS UNDERSTATED GRAVITAS,” SAYS POPOVICH. “AS LONG AS I’M HERE, HE’S GOING TO BE HERE.”

by *The Daily Telegraph* of Sydney, 71% disapproved of Freeman’s selection to light the cauldron. An outpouring of letters in dailies around the country during the Olympic fortnight not only criticized her role in the opening ceremony and her waving of the Aboriginal flag but also ripped her personally.

Only two years ago, again at Collingwood, a 13-year-old girl in the stands called Sydney Swans star Adam Goodes an “ape.” (The Collingwood club president apologized afterward, claiming that the girl didn’t realize that her comment was a slur.) Mills considers Goodes’s measured response a model for any indigenous athlete. “The press conference he held was absolutely perfect,” Mills says. “He used the incident as an example of how racism is still out there and everyone can learn from what happened. Now he’s the face of antiracism, and he was named Australian of the Year.” Yet five days later, the same Collingwood executive made a crack on a radio show linking Goodes to a production of *King Kong*.

Until a nationwide referendum granted full citizenship rights to indigenous Australians in 1967, they were considered “like a plant or an animal,” says James Rush, a Melbourne-based filmmaker whose documentary about Mills, *For My People*, will be released later this year. “White Australians don’t want to talk about it, and it’s so recent, so raw, that it’s a sensitive topic. And then there are those who don’t even know the Torres Strait Islands exist. So he’s not only educating people around the world, he’s educating Australians. Patty’s a bridge builder. And as an NBA star, he’s got the cool factor.

Crazy as it sounds, there aren’t many people who are proud to be indigenous. And Patty, he’s putting it on the world stage. He knows the impact of what he’s doing, though I don’t think he really understood it until he came back for the Trophy Tour.”

No other NBA champion had ever taken the Larry O’Brien Trophy on the road, Stanley Cup–style. But in the blush of the Spurs’ title, forward Matt Bonner asked the front office if he could take it home to New Hampshire for his annual music festival. Other players got wind of Bonner’s request, and soon the Spurs had arranged an itinerary with five Stateside stops, plus visits to Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, Italy and France. The Aussie leg hit six cities in seven days, for a roundelay of interviews and meet-and-greets featuring Baynes and Mills, who was undeterred by the sling for his recovering shoulder. *Lazza* is Aussie slang for Larry, so Mills dubbed their two-foot-high, gold-plated companion Bala Lazza.

A thousand fans turned out in Canberra, where the line for autographs and photos snaked around a city block. In Sydney, Bala Lazza posed by the Harbour Bridge and the Opera House. And when the Trophy Tour reached the Thursday Island ferry wharf, the Spurs’ delegation was met by Mills family members, elders and a dance team from Murray Island led by one of Patty’s aunts and Eddie’s descendants, Betty Mabo. After a procession to ANZAC Park, Mills and Baynes were each given a *dhari*, acknowledgment of their status as latter-day warriors.

“We have a saying in the Torres Strait,” says Pedro Stephen, mayor of the Torres Shire Council. “We ‘throw words.’ So when you speak into the air, you’re communicating with your ancestors.” When the chairman of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, Joseph Elu, likened Patty Mills to Eddie Mabo, the original presumably took note.

As dusk fell and the visitors and their hosts feasted on fried turtle and a sea mammal called *dugong*, the Murray Island troupe performed a traditional dance around Bala Lazza, with Patty and members of his family eventually joining in. “I wanted to jump in from the get-go,” Patty says, “but I was in the sling, and if there was video, I didn’t know what Pop would say. Then I thought, You know, I’ll deal with Pop back in San Antonio.”

Before leaving the island, Mills had a few more rounds to make. He sat Lazza for a photo in his grandfather’s favorite chair on the balcony of Sam Mills’s old home, from which Patty’s *dato* could see the grave of his wife, Salome, who died in 1993, and north all the way to Hammond Island. In Green Hill Cemetery he put Lazza between his grandparents’ tombstones. And he found the site of a beloved family photograph in which the 10-year-old Patty shoots at that basketball goal his grandfather put up. There, at the spot of that long-since removed hoop, he posed the Larry O’Brien Trophy for one last snapshot, an image to connect his past with his present.

Of that—and of much that Bala Lazza and Bala Pat did back in the Land of the Fair Go—Pop would surely approve. □



On the Unbeaten Path

→ BY MICHAEL ROSENBERG



IN EVERY GAME of this NCAA tournament Kentucky will face two teams: the one on the court with them, and the 1975–76 Hoosiers. Indiana went wire to wire that season, Secretariat-style, finishing 32–0 with a national title. No men's college basketball team has gone unbeaten since. But here come the Wildcats.

Perfect teams reside on an exalted shelf in America's trophy room. They are forever unbeaten, untied and untouched. This is why, as far back as 2013, Kentucky coach John Calipari said, "Before I retire, I'd like to coach an undefeated team."

And this is why the 2007 Patriots' loss to the Giants in the Super Bowl stings more, even now, than the 2011 Patriots' loss to the Giants in the Super Bowl. The '11 Pats were chasing a championship. The '07 Pats, 18–0 entering the game, were trying to climb onto that shelf. Sports fans will always wonder if the pressure got to that New England team, and not just the Giants' pass rush.

The 1972 Dolphins remain the NFL's last unbeaten team, and the average fan surely remembers them more than the '73 Super Bowl champions. (That was also Miami. I had to look it up.) If Kentucky wins this year's title, Indiana will fade a little deeper into history, so I asked the point guard on that '76 team, Quinn Buckner: Are you watching Kentucky?

"I may see a game, but I'm not *watching* Kentucky," Buckner says. "That sounds like I'm on Kentucky Watch. I'm not on Kentucky Watch."

So he isn't rooting against the Wildcats?

"For what?" he asks. "There is nothing to be gained emotionally. I wouldn't dare do that."

Buckner, a former NBA player and coach who is now a Pacers broadcaster, says he can't root against any college team. He has too much respect for the grind, and the opportunity. Besides, when he thinks of a team going into the NCAA tournament undefeated, these Wildcats aren't the first one that springs to mind. It's the 1974–75 Hoosiers.

That Indiana team should have won the national title, but star forward Scott May broke his arm at the end of the regular season, and the Hoosiers lost in a regional final . . . to Kentucky. Buckner says the 1975 Hoosiers were "tougher

As
Kentucky
marches on,
the point
guard of
the last
unbeaten
men's
college
basketball
team says,
"I don't think
there's any
question:
It's harder
for them."



**Will the
Wildcats go
undefeated?**

Join the
discussion on
Twitter by
using

#SIPointAfter and
following
@Rosenberg_Mike

to play against" than the '76 team. But now they are just another entry in the Encyclopedia of Almost.

With each Kentucky win this month, you will hear more about the 1976 Hoosiers. Their coach, a gentleman named Bob Knight, may even say a few words about the Wildcats, and some may even be printable. Knight has made it clear that he regards Calipari the way most of us regard uncurbed dogs.

As the comparisons unfold, prepare for this one: Indiana's seniors "played the right way" and Kentucky's young NBA-bound stars get by on talent, and therefore the Hoosiers were a more worthy champion. It's a cheap narrative, spread by those who haven't actually watched these Wildcats. It also ignores the changes in both the game and society over the last 39 years.

In 1976 an underdog could not pull an upset with a bunch of three-pointers, because there were no three-pointers. And back then—this is hard to believe—people did not take phones to the bathroom. They could reasonably ignore what others said about them. These days, who even tries?

In 1976 there wasn't as much talk about college basketball history, because there wasn't as much talk, period, and there hadn't been as much history. The sport, as a nationwide passion, was still fairly young. Buckner says that during the '75–76 season, "I never heard *undefeated*." He says the Hoosiers didn't really think about going unbeaten until they had done it. Kentucky's players have been asked about it since the preseason. "I don't think there is any question: It's harder for them," Buckner says.

Buckner speaks to May several times a week. "We talk about a lot of things," Buckner says, "but we don't talk about what Kentucky's doing." There is no need. The Wildcats may bump Indiana over a few feet. But nobody can ever knock the Hoosiers off that shelf. □



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WAKE UP TO
THE STRENGTH
TO ENDURE
A LIFETIME OF
BACON JOKES



WAKE
UP TO
EGGS
with Bacon

Nobody knows eggs better than Bacon, Kevin Bacon. And that's why I know an egg for breakfast provides 6 grams of high-quality protein for 70 calories and no sugar or carbs. So enough with the Bacon puns. Pick up an egg—they're eggcellent.

IncredibleEgg.org



Started my Camry.
Wanted tacos for lunch.
Crossed down into Baja.
Joined a soccer game.
Lost my passport to a seagull.
Hitched a ride on a cargo ship.
Got boarded by pirates.
Freed some livestock.
Retook the ship.
They were really good tacos.

THE **BOLD** NEW CAMRY

ONE BOLD CHOICE LEADS TO ANOTHER.



The 2015 Camry. Your first bold choice.
toyota.com/camry

Prototype shown with options. Production model will vary. ©2014 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.



Let's
Go
Places